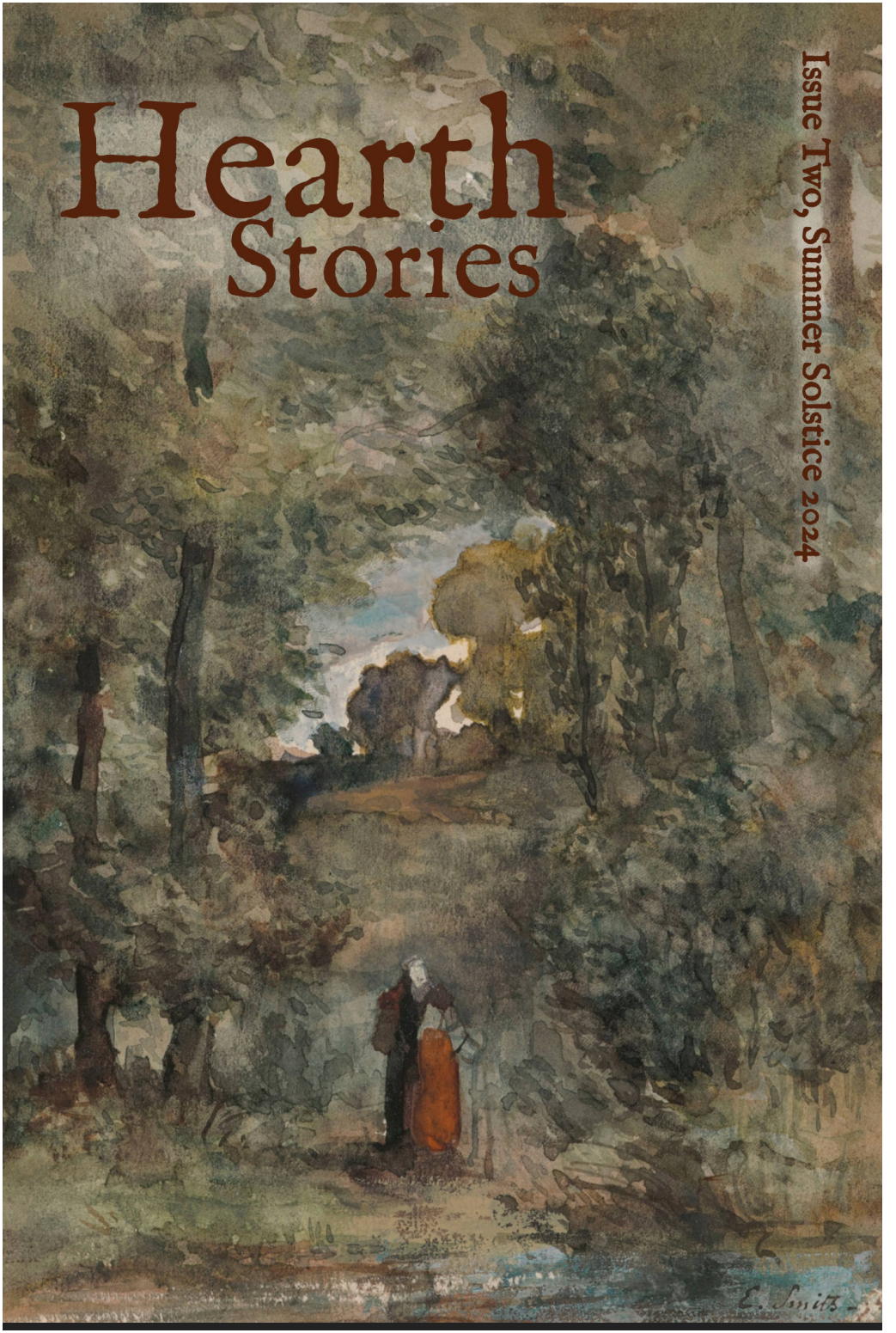
Hearth Stories

Issue Two, Summer Solstice 2024



Hearth Stories

Hearth Stories is a digital speculative fiction magazine exploring connection, family, relationships, comfort, and the natural world. For more information, please visit hearthstories.org.

Produced and Edited by Sloum.

A Letter from the Editor

How wonderful it is to be here again! Issue one exceeded my expectations, in terms of both quality of writing and public response. In the interim between issues we enjoyed and then endured a long winter here in the mountains. Spring is well under way as I write this. Our wild roses and dogwood are blooming. Our cherry trees have bright red—and slowly darkening—cherries on them, and our new apple tree got a few flowers. The birds are out and the bugs are buzzing and crawling everywhere. By the time anyone reads this it will be Summer. The grass will have long since dried out and the heat will be upon us. No doubt many fans will be blowing and the windows will be open.

This issue sees some darker themes; but they are still full of community, family, friends, and support. We got such wonderful submissions and are very grateful for the continued interest of such talented writers. I have tried to steer clear of the now common themes of "AI" and technology (as distopia or

utopia) in favor of more timeless stories set it more natural places. That said, there are still stories of the future, stories of the past, and stories that imagine something else entirely. Stories filled with books, deep woods, dreams, and the adventures of daily life as a living thing.

We are also very excited to announce that we will be serializing an ongoing work! "Dandelion," by Alicia Adams, which appeared in Issue One, is the first story in a series, the second if which, "You're Always Welcome Here", appears in this issue. We are looking forward to seeing where the series leads with each subsequent issue.

Enjoy your Summer and Autumn! We'll see you again come Winter.

—Sloum, Editor

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The Heart That Beats Behind the Bones

By Gwendolyn Maia Hicks

The priestess lives in the trunk of an evergreen cypress, and her dark house always smells of smoke. Underneath the smoke are other scents: lavender and balsam, cardamom, wax. There is no light inside this place, only imitations of it, stuttering in pieces on the wicks of candles. I am laid out on the floor, on the priestess' bed, a thin and fragrant mattress stuffed with pine needles. I cannot see her face—just a shadow here or there, where a fragment of the nose might be—but I don't have to see it to know it.

"Eik-Who-Is-Becoming," she asks me, in her low, familiar voice, "what did you dream?"

This exchange is routine, all part of the rite of becoming: I will utter the dream-things, and the priestess will take them, and she will translate them into truth. That is her gift—as another priestess, in another rite, had once glimpsed in her—that is who she became. A conduit from the old gods to us forest-dwellers, a teller of fates and selves.

Like all the young ones who come here, I am called only eik—until the priestess gives me a name.

"I was walking," I tell her. "I was walking with the other eiken, and overhead the sky was dark. We were talking ... whispering ... I felt that we were on our way to look for chanterelles, to help the foragers. And as we passed through the spruce grove ... I saw something."

The priestess doesn't press me. Her silence, textureless, invites the rest.

"A deer," I say. "A white one."

"The deer again."

"Yes."

"And?"

"I followed it," I continue. "I left the other eiken behind. They did not call after me. The seasons were changing as I walked, the branches growing and breaking, the birds and the insects hatching and aging and dying. The deer waited for me. It watched me with pink eyes."

"What did it do?"

I am not sure how to answer. I am imagining the priestess' neck under my lips, her hand carding through my hair; I am imagining the priestess' laugh, stitched into my skin. The heat of summer burnishes the visions. I close my eyes. If they're open, I'm afraid that she might see it: the real dream.

"Eik."

"It ran."

"Where did it run?"

"Out of the trees."

She laughs, bemused. "All our world is trees, eikje."

"I followed it to the edge of our world, priestess. Until there were no trees left. I followed it until my feet bled. It kept going."

She appears to my right, beside a flame whose light grazes her brown skin. I know her face well enough to recognize the tensing of the brow, the hardening of the mouth. She could easily be another of my friends, hiking down to the creek before dawn to catch and release minnows—but I see what separates us in her expression alone. She is here, listening. She will always be here.

"You're certain this was what you dreamed?" she asks. Her dark eyes peer into mine. "It was not an ordinary deer? It was white?"

"Yes."

"A doe or a stag?"

"It was a doe. No antlers."

"And when there were no more trees, what was left?"

I open my mouth, faltering. I am not sure how to put it into words.

"Everything," I say, although this feels insufficient.

The sound the priestess makes is soft, and sounds sad to my ears. "I see."

"Priestess, what does it tell you? What will I be?" I start to raise my head, too excited to lie still. "Will I tame wolves for Gostnyghte? Will I weave wedding fabrics? Will I build sturdy houses?"

"It is not clear to me yet, eikje, not yet. The old gods speak to me in slow voices."

I sigh, closing my eyes so that she won't catch my disappointment. I know my time with her is nearly up, that the other eiken have come with dreams to tell, too; but I can't bring myself to get up just yet.

"The old gods," I echo. So old are they that no one even knows their names. "Age has addled them."

"That isn't so. They left me a gift."

"Another?" Eagerly, I open my eyes again. "Will you show me?"

The priestess watches me a moment longer, then breathes out, amused.

"All right," she says, and crouches close to me with her hands on her knees. "Enough of dreams. But the next eik is waiting. We must be quick."

I fidget on the mattress, fingering the hem of my father's shirt, and follow the movements of her body as she reaches for an object on the table. She comes close again before long, her face waxing into view.

She holds out a honeycomb, teasing its edge with one stout finger. I watch the way the bones shift, watch the dark line of earth embedded along her cuticle. What I wouldn't give to be a gift left for her by the grateful old gods, who visit her as crows and magpies: a river stone, a piece of twine, existing only for the holding and the having. What I wouldn't give to know my name. I long to hear the priestess say it, in some soft and secret way, as if to hold it in her hands in the dark just like this. I shiver happily at the thought of it, and hope she does not notice.

"They are not forgetful," she tells me, tenderly—as she would defend a grandmother's eccentricities. "Not careless. Not cruel. They made you, and in their own good time they will guide you. And in the meantime," she whispers, her breath just slightly trembling, as if in happiness, "you are here, with me."

The moment crystallizes in the air between us, delicate—and then breaks apart again. She says, "You must go. If you dream again of the deer, tell me."

"Of course I'll tell you," I say, brushing my legs off as I stand. "What choice do I have?"

As I feel my way along the tree wall for the door—the only door there is, in or out—I hear her move and breathe behind me.

"Sweet eikje," she murmurs, "choice is what divides us from the dream."

When first I met the priestess, I was seven and she was nine. I was carried on my father's back up the winding path, out of the village. I tried several times to whisper the details of my dream to him, but he hushed me as we passed beneath the oaks.

Little one, your dreams are sacred. Secrets, eik, that the wise old gods whisper to you and you alone. You may speak of them only to the priestess, understand? Or else the old gods will feel betrayed, and they will take your name away.

It is said that I was the first of my generation to speak to her. I had been brought to her predecessor—a silver-haired woman with a cracked, kind face—a

small number of times, though I had always been reticent, hoarding the details of my dreams away as if I meant to be buried with them. It was only on that misty morning, when I first beheld my priestess, that I revealed them. My words for her flowed forth in excess.

It has been ten years, now, since my first dream. Truth be told I do not remember it—I hardly even remember my last—but the priestess does. *You saw a hawk*, she tells me, time and again, for I never tire of asking. *A white hawk, perched high in the pine boughs, and then taking wing. When you told me this, you wept.*

I long to know what I wept for. The hawk's flight, its reckless freedom? The absence of my father, who waited outside, where I could not see or remember him, where he could not tell me what to say? Was I astonished by this child's nine years, which seemed so cavernous compared to mine; by her noble self-sufficience, her seclusion, the parentless authority with which she spoke? Or had it merely been the priestess' dark and unknown house, and her strange smallness in it, and the way that she spoke my not-name, as if the two of us were strangers?

You're a crybaby, she tells me each time this story ends; tenderly, a secret that only the two of us know. *Always have been, always will be. There doesn't need to be a*

reason. You weep because that is what your heart tells you to do. Because that is who you are.

On my next visit, rain falls extravagantly from the sky. A whole season has wheeled by. The forest seems to thicken lushly in the downpour, all the pine boughs darker and heavier, all the oak leaves rioting with sound. Mud splatters on my bare feet as I run up the path past the ferns—long old enough, now, to leave my father behind. He had watched me go with a half-smile, chapped hands going still around the flute that he was whittling.

Someday, eik, he'd said at my excitement, *you will ache for the wondering.*

Two of my friends received their names at the Bilberry Moon's waning: Mikil, a fisherman, and Safti, a branch-gatherer. I had passed Mikil on my way here; he'd been hurrying to the lake, encouraged by the weather. He saw the path that I was taking, and beamed, and called out, *Maybe today, eik!*

My hair is wet and heavy by the time I reach the priestess' door; when she opens it and sees me, she laughs—hoarse, affectionate. I duck past her with a laugh.

"Oughtn't you be warm at home in such weather, eikje?" she asks me. She closes the door, and the familiar darkness swallows us. "Did your father not ask you to stay?"

"No, no." I kneel on the bedroll, still breathless. I take my hair in two hands and wring it out. "But he sends his best."

My father thinks well of the priestess, and always asks after her, though he has yet to meet her or even see her. Only eiken, after all, may enter the priestess' house, and he has not been eik in many, many years. The last priestess had given him his name when he was just thirteen. You are Radan, she had said, or so he tells me. A he. And you will carve beautiful things.

Thirteen, I think. And here I am—seven and ten.

"I hope these rains never stop," the priestess says happily—out of sight, as ever, busying herself with something over the stove.

"I know," I say, and recline. "You love storm season."

"How fortunate I am that you know me."

My face prickles pleasantly with heat. There are so many things I have come to know about her that the knowing seems like breathing: that she's a dismal singer, and afraid of owls, and loves the taste of honey. That her hands are broad. I collect these details, all the tiny incidental things she has revealed over the years through conversations, accidents, scarce moments between ritual and friendship. What other eiken, I wonder, almost proud, could claim to have heard her sing?

Does anyone know her at all, but me?

"Eik-Who-Is-Becoming, what did you dream?" she asks, and crouches on the earth beside me.

I link my fingers at my stomach. I listen to the logs and twigs burning in the fireplace, and the rain

falling on the ferns. In my silence, the priestess hums a song out of tune.

"A moth," I answer.

"What did it look like?"

The details come easily, rendered in sharp relief in my memory. "Wide. A pale lichen-green. I was with Safti when it came ... helping her gather kindling. Snow was falling. It was so quiet. She looked at me and smiled and said words that sounded chopped up. Before I could answer the moth landed on my wrist. It was as big as my hand—bigger. It rested there a while and then flew upward, toward the canopy. Safti didn't seem to see it. But I did." I lift my head until my neck goes stiff. "What does it mean?"

The priestess sighs. "You know I cannot tell you."

"Pretend, then."

"What?"

"It doesn't need to be true," I tell her. "Come here."

A moment passes. Then I hear a movement of cloth, and an exhale, and the priestess is lying beside me, on the bare ground. I lay my hand on the cool earth between our bodies, and her fingers twine absently into mine, warm from the fire.

"It means," she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice, the subtle thread of mischief, "that you will be a berry-picker. Your fingers will be stained red and purple. Your lips will taste sweet. Each day you will think only of baking pies and tarts and you will bring them to me in a little basket, until we are both ancient, and we will eat them together, just us two.

You will be called Henne." She whispers, "And you will be mine. Mine only."

My heart quickens below my throat. The priestess laughs, kept carefully in her chest, close enough that I can feel the air that it becomes on my cheek, almost a touch. I shift closer: stem to sun.

Outside, no other eiken are waiting for her. I should see the strangeness in this, maybe. But for this moment there is the priestess' breath, and the easy tangling of our fingers, and the distant falling of the rain. I close my eyes and listen.

I once asked the priestess a forbidden question, when I was twelve. We do not speak of it, but I remember. *If you could be anything*, I asked her, my eyes adjusting to the dark, *what would you be?*

I'd spent the day running through the trees with the other children, crowing songs of wolves and kings, and I was tired from my adventures. A dozen small muscles in my legs were twitching pleasantly. I could have drifted off right there, spread-eagled on the priestess' pine-stuffed mattress, and dreamed of nothing at all.

She said, *I would only ever wish to be what I am.*

The caution in her voice was evident. She must have thought the old gods were listening, measuring her reaction.

Then this, I asked, and gestured broadly to the dark house, *was what you wished for?*

I thought of her solitude, her proud but grieving parents, her visions and burdens. When she did not respond, I pressed her: *Not to be a fisher? A dancer? A tree-mender? A king?*

To my astonishment, she laughed—and this was a true laugh, girlish and sudden, pushing back against the dark.

No, she said. *Never a king.*

I dream of the moth again and again. Each time I wake in a sweat, with a dull ache under my belly in the shape of a fist. When I tell this to the priestess, I catch a flicker of emotion on her face before she can withhold it—doubt, or something deeper.

"An ache?" she mutters, prodding at the fire with a white fir branch. "I know nothing of that."

Soon enough the rain will turn to snow. The older trees have begun to drop their leaves, though the younger ones still cling to them. The priestess' house keeps out the cold well enough, but I had felt it on my slow walk up the path, its bones protruding from the late morning air.

"Priestess," I ask, laying one hand flat over my pelvis, to hold the ache, "what if I do not have a name?"

The priestess' face is turned away from me, her body edged in firelight. "Don't be silly."

"Tell it to me plain. What would become of me, if there were no name or fate to find?"

"I don't know, eik. I don't know."

The ache twists sideways, and my patience thins. "Is there anything you *do* know?"

That gets her to whirl around, a swift movement in the dark. Her right earring catches the light from the flames, a few loose coils of her black hair turned an eerie orange. I can tell that I've hurt her.

"I'm sorry," I say, immediately. "I'm sorry. That was cruel."

"At least you recognize it," the priestess says. It takes me aback, the coldness in her voice: the assertion of a self that I have never met. "Eik, the old gods have names for all of us. If they guard those names, there is a reason for it."

"But," I blurt out, shutting my eyes tight, "would I be shunned? Exiled? Would no one want me? Would it be like death?"

"Of course not! You—" The priestess breaks off, letting out a sharp breath through her nose. It is the first time in all my life that I have not wanted to be here with her. "All would still see you, eik. They just would not know you. But—but you would live!"

"How do you know?" I ask her, desperate. "How can you know that, priestess?"

Her silence leans against me with a body's weight. The ache is spreading to my knees, my ribs, my heart: the ache of not being.

"Eik-Who-Is-Becoming," she finally says, rote, as if reading from a distant wall, "I receive your dream, and will ponder its meaning. You may go."

As the season crawls on—as the village children years younger than I begin to find themselves with names, one after the other—that ache asserts itself inside of me more and more. The last two eiken of my generation are named at autumn's end. From the willows there is Hulen, a he, who will weave; from the riverside, Stert, a they, who will hunt. I wonder if the old gods remember that they made me at all. My father begins to watch me in a sad, formal way, disconcerted by me, pitying me: I am the only eik still left, a strange and awkward spirit lingering among my named friends. Where I walk, murmurs follow: *unnamed, unwanted, unnatural. Eik-forgotten-by-the-gods, eik-whose-body-is-empty. Eik-who-will-not-be.*

The yellow leaves begin to fall, and only the bald branches of the beeches are left, pale as bones between the evergreens. A child of only eight years is named under the new moon: Brinnan, a she, who will build fires.

Without dreams to offer, there is no pretense for me to visit the priestess. I consider inventing them, but I have a feeling that she would see through the charade. In the meantime, I help my father carry wood. I make stone chisels for Stert, dig for truffles with Mikil. I hike down to the stream alone, though I know the water has grown too cold for minnows, and

though the walk is so much shorter than it was when I was small. Underneath the pine boughs, with no one to know me, I invent names for myself.

I keep one.

When my next dream comes, the air outside is cold enough to break bark. I can hear the trees splitting as I trudge up the snow-laden path to the priestess's home. I linger outside the low wooden door, cold and discontent.

"Here, eikje," murmurs the priestess when I enter. She passes me a coarse stone cup. "Nettle tea. For the cold, and—for your ache. Does it still trouble you?"

I look at her face. In the winter, she stokes the fire more faithfully, and so when she passes by the hearth to come to me I can, for an instance, make out the rarer details of her—the little scar that splits her right eyebrow, the dark moles on her neck. Her neck.

"Yes," I whisper. "Yes, it does."

She shakes her head. She's bundled in layers of coarse linen, but she still shivers intermittently. She draws close, the fire now behind her, and I can't see her anymore.

"I'll tell you my dream," I say, so weary that it feels like a sickness. "There was a field. A field full of hares. Brown, black—soft as anything. They didn't run from me. I saw a white hare through the grass. I walked over to it and picked it up. It was real in my

hands, priestess, I could feel it breathing, I could feel its bones. And I—I lifted up its little body, and—and somehow behind the fur, behind the bones, I could see its heart. Wringing itself out, small as a walnut ... alive. So dark and so red and so delicate. I could see it."

I feel sick. The textures of the rabbit's heart glisten in my memory. The priestess' silence grows, and grows, until it is a thing with lungs.

"I see," she says at last.

"There," I say harshly, and set my cup on the ground beside the mattress, and lie back with a thud. "Now give me my name."

The priestess hesitates with a weight I cannot measure. "Your dreams will tell it to me, in time."

"In time? In time?" I rub my hands over my face, to hold back the weeping. "If I'd no dreams—if I'd never dreamed at all ... what would you call me? What would *you* call me?"

"Enough," the priestess says, quick and sharp. She plucks a candle from its holder, gripping it in front of her face to give me light enough to read her by. Her brow is knotted with something like pain and something like pride, and I cannot decide which angers me more. "Enough now. You cannot ask such questions, eikje. It is forbidden. They will hear."

"The old gods hear nothing," I half-shout, and push myself up on my palms. I keep my eyes on hers, which open themselves to me like wounds. "They decay, they forget. They leave you agates in the summertime like magpies—useless! And if they want to smite me for saying it, what difference will it

make? The life of an eik. Nameless, neuter." I am weeping, now, without wanting for it, as she says I always do. The truth germinates from within me: "I need no gods to want me, priestess. I know who I am, and what I will be. My name is—"

The priestess drops the candle; for a moment, all is dark—so dark that I could sink my hand into it. But then there is a touch at my wrists, an array of fingers: the priestess is gripping them, lifting them up, until my knuckles graze her mouth.

She breathes out, a shuddering heat upon my skin.

"Stop this," she whispers. "You must stop this now. If not for your life—then for me. For me. Please?"

I would do so many things for her—gather the sweetest berries, fell the oldest tree; I would break off a piece of the sky for her to keep or eat or wear as a pendant—but this, I know that I cannot. I don't know what will become of me. I don't know if my heart will stop, if I will burst into flames, if the priestess will be compelled to unsheathe a ceremonial knife and gut me for my sacrilege.

I have been alive too long not to know myself. Is that why the old gods give us our names when we are only children?

"I know who I am," I say again, louder this time. "And I need no priestess to tell me—"

"Eikje, so do I!" she cries, in a voice that breaks like bark, in a voice that has endured too much. "So do I. I know who you are."

I answer with nothing. Her fingers are still clutching my wrists, with such force and desperation

that an insistent pain pulses through me, but I do not pull away.

"I have known it for so long," she chokes out. "All your dreams of departure—of power—and this, the little life in your hands, to hold and to know ... what else could you be but a king?"

All at once the room seems to retreat—there is only my body, and her body, and the magnitude of the truth between them.

"When I became the priestess of this place, the old gods told me that a king would be born in my lifetime. They told me that he would dream of a hawk, a deer, a moth, a hare's heart. From that first moment, eikje—the tears that you shed—I think that you knew even then what you would become. And you wept for it."

That sadness is upon me again, too vast, too merciless.

"You are Irskellan. A he. And you will leave us, and build great cities, and watch over all forests. A scholar and a protector. Tongue of the gods. Truest son."

I curse my dreams. I curse my mouth for ever setting them free.

"Why," I manage to rasp, "did you not tell me?"

The priestess makes a choked noise, brings my hands close until my knuckles meet her forehead. "Because I didn't want you to go. I wanted you forever, my eikje, with your silly laugh. Your sensitive heart. Your brown hair and your impossible questions. I couldn't bear it."

"But ... but I'm not a king. I'm not. I'm like you."

"Like me?"

"A she."

Her eyes glisten darkly, like the heart of the hare. "I—there is nothing to be done. I have said it, now, so it will be. But ... you may come to embrace it, in time. The gods' plans for us are truer and more noble than we can imagine. If it is their will that you should leave me, then I ... I would bow my head and praise their wisdom." Her voice shakes, faintly. "Who would I be to deny them?"

My shock is swallowed up by something bigger, then. It is swallowed up by anger. She no longer sounds like my priestess; she sounds like she is reading from a scroll. I wonder, with a flash of bitterness, if that is how everyone here has always sounded. My father. My friends. The priestess, steering them this way and that, eyes down, face hidden. Questioning nothing.

I wrench my hands out of hers, folding them tight beneath my throat. We've moved too far from the fire to see each other. I wish that the darkness would pull itself back so that she could face the way I am looking at her, but it stays right where it is, obscuring everything between us.

"It all sounds so pretty when you say it." The words spill out of me before I even know what they will be. "Kings and gods. And how easy it must be for you! How easy it must have always been! Sitting in your tree, telling all us nameless eiken what to be, what to want. No arguments. No questions. Who could reject a fate like yours?" I stumble to my feet, half-laughing, groping through the flickering shadows

for the wall, to try to follow it out. Cruelty cuts into my voice, sharp and clean: "They gave you everything. Of course you didn't deny them. You *belong* to them."

"Wait," the priestess says—not loud, not firm, but small like a forgotten animal.

My fingers chance upon the wooden plank barring the door, and I haul it up with both hands. The smell of pine and snow burns in my nostrils. My legs are shaking, but not from the cold.

"Where," the priestess cries out behind me, "are you going?"

"That, priestess," I vengefully reply, "your gods cannot tell you." And into the snow, down the path, past the silently breaking trees, I run. And run. And run.

The moon is high when I reach the village, and the windows of all the familiar houses are dark. I slip into my own—a sturdy log hut underneath a trio of redwoods—careful to handle the door without a noise. I can't wake my father.

There are only embers in the hearth. The one-room house is quiet, the modest kitchen still. Across the room, my father is asleep in his bed; his body is turned away from me, and his gray hair is just visible over the old ramie blanket. He doesn't stir at my entrance.

My mother had built his bed, and mine. Lijste, she was called. A carpenter. I shake my head before the

memories can creep in, and hurry to my bedroll by the east window. I can't imagine that anyone is chasing me—who would the priestess send to apprehend those who defy her?—but I feel as if time is of the essence: I'll need to pack my things quickly, without room for sentiment. I crouch down and rummage silently for the bag we use to carry mushrooms. My father won't miss it.

My hands are shaking as they pack things into the bag at my side: a knife, a scarf, a length of rope, flint and a small skillet, nuts wrapped in paper. My rage cracks into shards of fear and then mends itself again. A part of me wonders if the priestess will appear at my door, if she'll break her sacred solitude and take everything back—my false name, my false fate—confess her mistake, beg me to stay. I want her to, I want her to. No. I never want to see her again.

I wipe the crust of dried tears from my cheek with the back of my hand, reaching for my father's walking stick by the fireplace.

"Eik, is that you?"

I freeze. My father's voice is coarse with sleep behind me.

"It's only a dream, vad. Go back to sleep."

"You think I don't know a dream when I'm having one?" I hear him sit up in bed, his bare feet landing on the dirt floor. "Where are you going?"

"Oh," I say, voice trembling, "I wish that I knew the answer."

He's quiet for a moment. I still can't bring myself to turn around and face him. I close my hand around the walking stick.

There is little point in lying, now. "Vad, I am leaving. I don't think I will come back."

"Why is that?" He has always been so calm. I wish that it were daylight, if just so that I could see his face and be comforted by it: the craggy wrinkles by his eyes, the patches of stubble gone gray.

"I've defied the gods, is why." I swallow, fighting to keep my voice steady—to sound braver than I am. "The dreams that they sent to me—what the priestess has made of their messages ... that name is not mine. I won't pretend that it is. So I am running."

My father is silent for a long, slackening moment. My throat tightens painfully, as if around a pine cone. I wonder if I'll cry again. I hope I do. Because that is who I am.

"All those long-ago mornings," he whispers at last, "when I carried you on my back, because you were too small for the journey. You clung to me with all your strength, at first ... but in time, it lessened. And in time, you walked alongside me. And in time, you walked alone. You told me, 'Vad, I am grown now. I know the way.'

"Eik, I will tell you a secret. As a child, I once dreamed of a great storm. Rain fell from the sky, thunder shook the trees. I stood at the center of it, in a clearing I had never visited. I tipped my head back and caught the water in my mouth, and it tasted sweeter than you can imagine. I dreamed that the rain made a great sea, and it swept me away, and I happily drowned."

I stare at him, too stunned to react. I had always imagined that to speak of a dream outside of the

sacred presence of the priestess would see one struck down then and there—that the sky would darken, or the ground would shake—but my father only goes on sitting on the bed built by my mother's hands, the same person that he has always been.

"I never told my priestess this dream," he confesses. "I kept it for my own. I could not tell you why. I was young, and when you are young, to have a thing that belongs to you is precious. Often I have wondered—if I did offer it to her, would she have seen a different fate for me? A different name? Or did it never matter at all? Do the old gods know from the first what they will make of us? And if they do, what is it all for?"

He pauses, his gaze drifting to the floor.

"I think there is no greater gift they could give us," he says, "than the wondering."

Before the dawn can break, I run. My panting breaths burst from my mouth in clouds, streaming away behind me. My sack beats against my hip like a drummer's hand. The cold burns my lungs. A time or two I stumble, slip on a patch of ice, but I hardly register the bruises. I keep running.

When I reach the cypress door, I all but throw myself against it. I pound an open hand against the wood until my palm stings.

I am still pounding on it when it opens, my hand sailing through the empty space. The priestess,

huddled behind the door, stares at me with red-rimmed eyes. She has been crying.

"Eikje," she chokes out, and I push gently past her, stepping into the house.

She shuts the door behind me, and we are in pure darkness. Not even the candles are lit. The fire has gone out. I catch my breath and wait for my eyes to adjust.

"You're leaving," the priestess says, her voice as thin as paper. She must have seen my bag. She shuffles past me, and lights a single candle: just enough by which to see her face, if I am standing close enough.

And because there is nothing else I know how to say, nothing else I could offer her, I say: "Come with me."

My priestess stares at me, slack-faced. I cross the room and lift my hands to her face. They settle, my fingers gently splitting over her ears, my thumb stroking her cheek bones. The candle's humble flame flutters between our bodies.

"Remember who you were before the old gods named you. Remember what you let yourself want. Remember when you might have been a berry-picker."

Recognition shifts gorgeously across her face. Slowly, as if half-unaware of the gesture, she raises her left hand and touches the back of my wrist.

"They could choose their own names," I whisper, "and listen to their own dreams."

Mutely, she shakes her head. Laughing, crying, both at once, I shake mine, too.

"Would that be such a catastrophe? Would the woods be felled for it? Would the earth split open? Or was this what the old gods meant to leave behind for us, priestess, priestess, was it their last great hope that we should steer our own becoming?"

I imagine what it would mean for the trunk of this ancient cypress to stand empty, for the eiken of the old gods' wood to wend their way to their fate unguided. My heart, dark and red, beats fiercely in my bones.

"Priestess," I tell her, "I am here, right now. Awake. Making a choice. And the earth is as whole as I am."

In no time at all, the trees of our forest will bud again, their tender new leaves aging until they can be used in medicines and soups, bandages and dances. And the priestess—namer, knower—is looking at me as if seeing me for the first time.

"Trouwe," she whispers. "That is my name."

She lays her hand over mine, and turns her face into my palm until the next word gathers on the skin. "My name is Trouwe."

Her name—her name. The one that the old gods gave her, or the one that she found within herself, behind the bones, and kept? I realize it doesn't matter. I repeat it, carefully, a hand around a stem. I let it root inside of me—and tell me, gently, how to be.

"Eikje," she whispers, and looks into my eyes. "Tell me yours."

GWENDOLYN MAIA HICKS

Gwendolyn Maia Hicks (she/they) writes emails by day and fiction about feelings by night. Her youth was spent in Petaluma and Novato, California, and she now lives in San Francisco. She attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop in 2022. She loves green things, yearning, and the Mountain Goats. She currently hosts the podcast Works Cited. You can find her publications on her website, prioryruins.neocities.org.

Q&A with Gwendolyn Maia Hicks

The following questions were posed by A. Katherine Black, author of *Outside of Wonderful*, and are answered by Gwendolyn Maia Hicks about their story *The Heart That Beats Behind the Bones.*

I was immediately drawn into the opening setting of "The Heart That Beats Behind the Bones," which contributes so well to the mood and tone of the story. What inspired you to choose this setting?

> Thank you! I grew up around redwood forests and I've always found the deep woods to be an otherworldly place where time slackens, and the ancient watchfulness of nature is palpable. I wrote the first scene sitting in the AIDS Memorial Grove in Golden Gate Park, surrounded by a sense of love and grief and community, and I hope some of that seeped into the atmosphere of the story. I was thinking about a society where redwoods were the

blueprint: they're able to grow and thrive because their root systems are completely intertwined. The forest in this story—which I wanted to feel sort of infinite, liminal—is heavily based on the forests I explored as a kid in Sonoma County.

The theme of this story, surrounding identity and self-determination, resonated with me, personally, as I suspect it will for many readers. Do you typically have a theme in mind when you start writing a story?

I'm really glad that it resonated with you. It's a theme I find myself revisiting a lot in my stories, whether I intend to or not.

I almost never have a theme in mind when I start writing the story. The characters and their circumstances usually come to me first, and theme grows organically from that. For me, personally, having preconceived notions of a story's theme can be restrictive; I find myself paying too much attention to writing parallel to it, rather than letting it naturally assert itself through the whole. I don't know if I'm explaining it very well.

The very first seed for this story came from an anecdote someone told me about a Jola village they visited in Senegal. They met a man there who had become king of a number of villages two years prior, and had once been a bus driver and aspiring mechanic, until he had a dream that revealed his destiny of being king (which, in his community, was a role similar to

a priest). The idea of that really struck me. My first thought was, of course, what would happen in that situation if the man didn't want to be the king, if he wanted instead to pursue another path. Could that responsibility be abdicated? What would it mean if it was? Then I started thinking about a society where everything about one's identity was determined by oneiric interpretation: name, gender/pronouns, and so on. It was important to me not to say this structure was flawed or oppressive, but rather to explore how it would affect one's selfhood, whether it would work for everyone, and what it would mean if someone were to definitively say, "No. That isn't who I am." And once I started thinking about that, the themes around identity and self-determination felt like a natural consequence.

I look forward to reading more of your stories! What are you working on now?

I can't wait to read more of yours!

Right now I'm working on a novella about a support group for people who have lived through time loops and are struggling to re-adjust to linear time. I'm also shuffling around a short story about a pair of enby wizards with a complicated history (read: they're exes) who find themselves at odds trying to open a magical door, both hoping to escape a world that has exploited them in different ways.

The Woman with the Bird in Her Skirts

By River West

She woke from a deep sleep to see something jerking about beneath the bedclothes, in the gap between her shins. She gasped and sat up. The thing turned, twisting the white bedclothes around itself, and then reared up, and she saw clearly the white of the sheet laid over the wingspan, the small round skull. She couldn't scream, but she scrambled back in the bed, away from the thing. Miss Coppard, the teacher with whom she shared the room, opened her eyes, and Ada thought wildly, *how can I explain how I came to have a bird in my bed?* and of how quickly the story would get about the school, and how the girls would laugh.

"Miss Deal?" Miss Coppard said, staring insofar as an overworked woman, no longer young, can see to stare, when she is unexpectedly woken in the early morning. Ada stared back at her for one frantic second, then looked at her bedclothes. They were flat, innocent.

"I," Ada said, coughed to give herself time, "I had a nightmare."

All that day any movement in the corner of the room, or the flash of wings outside the classroom window, made her jump, but the creature was not there next morning. It was when she was hearing the small girls' history lesson, in the afternoon, that she felt it–softly brushing feathers against her ankles. She bit down hard on the word she was speaking–*Gibraltar.* She tried to look downwards at the skirt of her grey dress without drawing the girls' attention to it, but how could she manage it when every one of their eyes was on her? Little staring things. Her skirts shook and the thing rammed against her legs so that she nearly overbalanced. She held onto the edge of the desk and wrenched her eyes up to meet the children's. Little round beads of green glass, blue, grey, clear as the sky.

"Gibraltar, Miss Deal," prompted Sarah Denby, one of the kinder of them. Yes, but what could there possibly be to say about Gibraltar when there was a bird living in your skirts? A nameless bird, of no genus known to her books, a bird with grey and crimson feathers and a strong beak and strong feet, pecking and kicking and beating its wings to be away somewhere.

"Gibraltar," Ada said, and whether it was because they thought she was giving an instruction, or from pity, they all launched into repeating yesterday's lesson, which had touched on the treaty that had acquired that territory. Behind her desk Ada clasped

her hands tight together, and by the time their high voices stopped chanting her dress hung straight again.

She had grown used to cold and low wages, bad cooking and crowding and not mattering to anybody. She had grown used to the knowledge that none of her childhood dreams of turning out to be a princess or a shield-maiden would come true. She grew used to the bird. It was not much trouble, really, except that its shufflings at night made her restless; it wanted to fly, perhaps, but it stayed with her nonetheless. When she closed her eyes she would see it as if in sudden sunlight, its red feathers and its black eyes.

One afternoon she walked out of the school without telling anybody, up the cobbled high road into the autumn and the grass world of the moors.

When she reached the tiny valley where the stream ran out of the rocks she pulled off her boots and stockings, without thinking, and waded in. Stones on the soles of her feet and the empty hills above her. The cold of the water was sharp, full; it ached all the way through to her bones. Someone could come by at any moment so she could not but she did unbutton her dress and tug loose the ties of her petticoat and peel them over her head, throw them on the bank. When her skin was bare she waded down to where the water pooled and ducked under, came up gasping, her hair dripping, bright drips in her eyes, and she saw it fly, the black of its eyes turned for a moment

towards her, brilliant, the creamy many-greyed richness of its underfeathers, the curve of its flight. It turned up and away from her, and as she watched she saw the world from its eyes, the risings and fallings of the moor, the ripple of the stream winding its way through the land, the grey stone mass of the school and the line where the sky and the moor met at their far reach. She closed her eyes and felt space at the tips of her wings, air all around her, and it was a long time later, perhaps, that she opened her eyes to the moor and the pile of her clothes on the stream bank, and her arms wrapped around her chilled, goose-pimpled flesh. She fastened her clothes with half-numb fingers and set out for the school, her stride unencumbered by the bird. The October sun had gone from the sky, which was empty, and the air was grey and cool and fine.

"Miss Deal," one of the girls said, running to greet her as she stepped out of the wideness of the moor into the school yard, "the chickens have got out," and she was drawn into hearing about their escape, the great event of the day, and then to supper, and apart from a strange pang when she moved her feet and felt no scratch of feathers on her ankles, she did not think of the bird again until she lay down to sleep and found that sleep did not come easily. She missed it in the sheets that were bare and cool, in the night that was innocent of a heartbeat no-one else could hear.

She woke just before dawn out of dreams of flying to a scratching at the sheets, the jerking of its head as its beak stabbed into its feathers. Her face

relaxed into a half-smile and she turned over to fall asleep again and dream of nothing.

For after all, what did it matter? she thought. If one had no money, no home, if the bread was stale and the gravy greasy. Winter, teaching piano to one of the newest girls in the school, watching the snow fly diagonally outside the window, framed by the thick curtains. What did it matter that she would grow old hidden and never admired and never wear a pretty gown again and forget how to talk to people who were not children, what did it matter that the prayers were hypocrisy and her good boots were worn thin and the girl sitting next to her should get a conduct mark for not practising the tune she was mangling so dreadfully?

"I did practise," said the little girl, whose face was flooded red, and who was pushing the pedals as if she would punish the piano. "I did."

"Well, I believe you, Grace," Ada said, for in fact she did, and it did not matter if she did not. She looked out at the snow again and seemed to feel something flow down through her neck and shoulders and arms and into her hands that rested on the piano keys, and out into the white flakes, so that she settled into the snow, so that her mind was deeply empty. What did it matter? She pressed a single key, C, and

sat looking at the piano until the child grew frightened and tugged at her sleeve.

The teachers came and went, Miss Clough, Miss Atkins, Miss Water, Miss Sneddon, Miss Shaw. They would marry if they could marry. Or they might go out into the world after their own schools, a passage over the sea, or a situation that promised no improvement but change. You grew tired of the same faces, the same stories, said Miss Sneddon to Miss Deal on the last day of her own employment. It began to feel like disappearing. Ada understood perfectly. Even the new girls knew that Miss Deal was the only one who had never left, who never even talked of leaving, as the seasons changed round and round, as the girls' hair curled and uncurled according to the fashions of the years, as the principals changed and the rules changed and changed back again and classrooms became cloakrooms became kitchens, as wings were knocked down and new ones built, until no face and no surface was the same.

Her own face had changed most of all, she thought when she looked in the mirror, and her arms and legs too, stiff now. She knew the peculiarities for which she was laughed at–she did not like to be touched, not even brushed against in a crowd. She still had her few clothes made in the fashions of her own twenties, now two decades past, and strange and quaint to the girls' eyes. She went for long walks alone and would hardly ever accept a companion

even though they only offered out of kindness and she knew they thought she should be grateful. She talked to herself. She was too old and set in her ways, poor Miss Deal, to find a new place now.

They all looked up at her one morning, when in the middle of the silent study she was presiding over, she dropped her pen on her high desk. It was another autumn day, one following a cold spell that had chased everybody into flannel and wool and then broken into a series of glorious bright days. They all sat sweltering as the sun beat through the glass and made the room hotter, it seemed, than summer. The bird between her feet, whose feathers had grown rough and thin over the years, whose presence was mostly a lolling warmth against her right calf, straightened and spread its wings, and she dropped her pen. The girls looked up but their faces were no longer distinct to her as they had once been; they were only a sea of sunlight on pink, dappled by the shadows of windowpanes and shutters.

She stood up, creaked, stepped down the steps off the raised dais. Their heads turned, watching her go, as she walked down the centre of the room to the door. Only when she had opened it did one of them say her name, ask if was she ill. She passed out of the door. They did not follow her.

The air outside tasted like cream and the shadows all cast one way, up towards the moors. The birds always knew at the last when it was time to go, and

all these years there had been a time and she had been not trapped but waiting. She ran, as well as she could run, up the stony path; she kicked off her heavy boots and ran on the stones in her thick stockings. The sun cast before her the shadow of her outstretched arms, thin like the branches of winter trees. She scrambled up out of the ditch of the path to the wide grass and spun like a child, like the girls would spin chanting *dizzy dolls, dizzy dolls*, because they liked to turn sick and stagger and for the world to tip underneath their feet. She did not take off her clothes now, did not have to; she let the thump of her heart quicken in time with the clap of wings, and at last it flew, that scarlet and shadow thing, upwards and unstopped by her body, which had fused down into it–her breastbone, her brow. Nothing was left but her clothes, which lay on the grass, empty, to be found later by the girls who combed the moor for her in pairs, laughing and calling to each other, delighted simply to be out under the sky.

RIVER WEST

River West is a wandering writer and parent who calls Scotland home. She can be found online at riverweststories.co.uk.

Q&A with River West

The following questions were posed by Elevens, co-editor of *Hearth Stories*, and are answered by River West about their story *The Woman with the Bird in Her Skirts*.

This is such a quietly fantastic story. An odd and surreal thing happens in an otherwise realistic setting. It's a style we very much enjoyed. Can you tell us about how you developed your style and some of the stories or writers who have influenced your work?

> On my noticeboard, which sits on my writing desk, I have a quote from Hannu Rajaniemi that says, "Mainstream fiction is not about real people, it's not about the real world ... It's about a world which is very much like our world, but which is essentially the author's perception of all the elements in our reality. Somehow I feel it's more honest to accept that, in fact, you can

introduce any fantastical element you like." This is a talismanic idea to me.

One of my favourite novels that seamlessly interweaves the real and the fantastical (in this case, a shared dream world) is *Amaryllis Night and Day*, by Russell Hoban. Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, too, which uses fantasy elements so naturalistically that they make the whole of her world and story feel more resonant and real. Last year I read Priya Sharma's *Ormeshadow* which captures a spirit of place using fantasy in a way I was trying to do in this story. Other influences on my short fiction include Margo Lanagan, Amal El-Mohtar, Helen Marshall, Kelly Link, Theodora Goss, KJ Bishop, Ted Hughes, Michèle Roberts, Edith Wharton and Susanna Clarke.

What was the initial spark for this story? Did it develop in a way that surprised you?

The title was the initial spark; I can't remember what made me think of it but I found it again years afterwards when looking through my old notebooks for ideas for something to write. I began the story thinking it would be about a haunted theatre costume but I could never get that off the ground—the story wanted to be something more elemental and wilder-feeling. I often find myself writing about characters trapped by life who find freedom or a sense of freedom through magic or some moment of grace and that's the kind of narrative that

emerged here. I was surprised by that; it wasn't what I thought I was going to write, but I do as little planning as I can get away with when it comes to writing, so I'm often surprised.

We love the setting of the school on the moor. Is this a setting that you've used before or that you are familiar with in your own life?

I am originally from West Yorkshire in northern England and though it's nearly a decade since I've lived there that landscape gets into almost everything I write in one way or another. This particular story draws unsubtly on the Brontës, particularly *Jane Eyre*, and Lowood School, for the setting, but is also more directly a response to the countryside around Haworth and Hebden Bridge.

We saw on your website that you are working on a novel. Is there anything you can share with us about it?

I have the attention span of a caffeinated gnat so writing this novel is taking me a long time. Sometimes I think I should never have attempted it and should have stuck to short fiction which suits my disposition more, but it is very satisfying to sink as deeply into a world as you get to with a novel. I describe it as a zombie(ish) post-post-apocalytpic road novel. I'm determined to finish it this year.

Tome for Tea

By Margaret Treanor Frey

Samine had never been to this particular mountain before, but she had heard stories. There was a shapeshifting dragon (a pakhangba) atop it, a particularly vicious one, if rumors were to be believed.

As a rule, though, Samine didn't believe rumors. Well, she believed *in* them. She believed there was always something that made them spread. Were they salacious? Incredible? Frightening? More importantly, how did they change the behavior of the people propagating them, and who would gain the most from them? You had to listen to rumors, so you could hear the unspoken things around them.

The bookstore she was looking for was at the base of the mountain. This low on the slope, the woods were not yet too dark or dense. The sun fell through the trees like spotlights onto the charming storefront. The sign above the door, carved in the shape of an open book, identified the place as "Tome for Tea."

Samine pushed the door open, setting off a precariously hung bell just inside. "A customer! Do come in!" The bookseller swept up, tall, graceful, with long white flowing hair. "You look like you've come a long way to my little shop. Delightful! I'll put the tea on while you browse, and then you can tell me all about your travels."

Samine was a little surprised at the enthusiasm, but a nice cuppa sounded pleasant after the dust of the road. She took the opportunity to look around the shop. There was a wee table set up in the middle of the front room (with several lushly upholstered chairs, presumably where she would end up for the tea) and rooms branching off to either side. Bookshelves lined every wall, with an eclectic collection of teapots placed on the shelves strategically between topics. (The one covered in gold ceramic vines began the Herbalism section.) The bookseller had disappeared behind the counter into another little room, which, from the sounds of clanging and splooshing, was probably the kitchen.

The range of books in the shop was impressive. There were whole banks of them to the left, held down by locked bars. Samine could read the titles, but not open the books themselves. They seemed eldritch and old, well preserved.

Off to the right, the books were treated more cavalierly, some of them even piled up in barrels. Samine opened the top one of these small, worn tomes and began to read a bit, but hastily closed it when she got to a part that made her blush.

Yes. Quite a range.

In the center room, behind the waiting tea table, there was an ostentatious display of many copies of a brand new book. Samine picked one up and began to flip through *How to Survive Your First Encounter with a Shapeshifting Pakhangba.*

"You know there's one living right here on this mountain," the bookseller said, balancing a tray with two cups, a plate of biscuits, and a ceramic monstrosity that probably considered itself a teapot. There was a spout, a handle, and a lid, and presumably even actual tea hidden deep within the immensely offensive sculpture of what Samine could only assume were meant to be gamboling gnomes. The cavorting figures had ridiculously exaggerated, pointed hats, in colors not found in nature, cheeks so round they could only have pumpkins hidden in them, and so red they likely all suffered from liver conditions. And those vacuous grins!

"Ah, you noticed the teapot. I like my guests to feel at home, so I picked this one out special. You are a gnome, yes?"

"Yes. Yes I am. It's ... lovely." Or, at least, it was a lovely thought.

The tea itself was quite nice, and to avoid making eye contact with the monstrosity now squatting in the center of the table, Samine instead examined the first few pages of the book. "It's so convenient to have this book on offer right at the base of the mountain. Is the author local?"

"Oh you could say that. We're closely acquainted."

"This is you, isn't it? Ulen Gamba?"

"You've found me out! Do tell me how you like the book, when you've finished it."

"And is this book effective?"

"It's got very reliable information, yes."

"I'll take it. It seems like an excellent investment. So now that I own this book, I'm guaranteed to survive my first encounter with a shapeshifting pakhangba."

"I would stake my reputation on it."

"That's pretty good odds if you happen to be the shapeshifting pakhangba."

Ulen's easy smile became fixed in place. "Ah ha ha. What an unlikely twist that would be."

"Wouldn't it, though." Samine pointedly put her newly acquired book on her lap, and continued to sip her tea. The flavor had been developing. As she got further down in the cup, the citrus was giving way to something more salty and ginger, but with no hint of bitterness. It may have been the best cup of tea she had ever had.

They sat quietly, sipping in turns. Ulen's look of suspicion became more speculative as Samine sat calmly, nibbling a biscuit rather than, say, screaming, or running for the door.

Finally, the bookseller broke the silence. "I mean, really, what a provocative thing to say."

"Just thinking in hypotheticals," Samine waved her tea cup as if she were saying nothing of any importance. "If I were an ancient, powerful, and profoundly misunderstood being who could only live my life convivially by hiding my true nature, I might be tempted to leave hints, dare exposure in subtle

ways. Of course any customer who bought my book on how to survive their first encounter with me would get their money's worth as soon as they walked out the door with their vitals intact, so it wouldn't be a lie, exactly. But every time they did that, I'm sure the titillation at having fooled yet another person would be confounded by the disappointment of not being seen as who I really am, yet again."

"That sounds a bit sad, your completely speculative story, there."

"And I think, once I tired of that life, I might want to find someplace I could live as myself. There's a whole realm of potential one can discover when the basic needs of security and company are met, and that's when we truly find what we are capable of."

"Now you've wandered into fantasy. You propose in your entirely hypothetical situation, that there's a place where a feared, vicious monster could just, what? Set down roots? Be a regular old citizen? Surrounded by other monsters and misfits, I suppose, all just ... being themselves? Absurd."

"I'm building such a place. You asked me to tell you about my travels. I'm scouting. I'm opening an inn there, sort of a base of operations, but to really be comfortable, we'll need other vendors and craftspeople. I was thinking a bookstore would really class the place up."

Ulen had frozen with his tea aloft, but shook himself and said, "You're just a little unhinged, aren't you?"

Samine put her tea cup and her book on the table and rooted a piece of paper out of her bag. "Here's a map. It's a couple months travel west, right where the Michi River flows into Lake Gumee. It's about halfway up the tallest mountain in the Trollback Range. Actually, there's a stone tower there that's unclaimed, right on the main road. With a little work it would make quite the bookshop. It's yours if you want it. I'll be a few months longer getting back, as I'm recruiting as I go, but show this to Dryad Magnolia by the main oak in the crossroads. She'll show you around." Samine handed over the map, which had her signature on the reverse side, with a smiley face over the *i*.

"What, me? You can't be serious."

"I am, though. Well, I'd best be off. Thank you for the excellent tea. I've never had its like. Ah, and here. I should pay before I go." Samine handed over a rather hefty pouch of gold.

"This is ... way, way too much. How many books are you buying?"

Samine chuckled, "All of them, in a way. It's to help with your moving costs."

"How vexing you are! I haven't said anything about moving my shop."

"Well, you can hold on to the gold while you're giving it a good think. I trust you."

"Why? We just met!"

"Gotta start somewhere."

Samine left the befuddled bookseller sputtering in his lair and continued down the road toward her next

recruit. There was an arachnid-born weaver a couple of valleys over known for her exquisite silks.

It was a few minutes later that she noticed she was still carrying the book, *How to Survive Your First Encounter with a Shapeshifting Pakhangba*, and stopped, taking a moment to appreciate the tidy binding and sharply cut edges. It was very well-made. Samine looked around at the quiet fields, then the empty slopes, then the peaceful, clear blue sky.

Samine said to the empty road, as she put the book away in her pack, "What do you know? It works."

MARGARET TREANOR FREY

Margaret Treanor Frey is a writer and illustrator living in Glendale, California. Her in-progress graphic novel, Assuming You Survive, is an exploration of ordinary lives in a fantastical setting, where all the monsters are achingly human. Her illustrations are a surreal exploration of generally biological topics, grounded in black-and-white line art.

Q&A with Margaret Treanor Frey

The following questions were posed by H. A. Titus, author of *Past Lives and Loaves*, and are answered by Margaret Treanor Frey about their story *Tome for Tea*.

I love unusual fantasy protagonists—what made you decide to pick a gnome to be the protagonist of your story?

> I played a gnome in my last Dungeons and Dragons campaign. I did it at random! Actually rolled dice on the character tables. Another player did the same thing, and rolled up an almost identical character, purely by chance. We decided they were cousins. They were obsessed with making the perfect pie, so every new setting was an excuse to research local ingredients. But whereas Vittie (short for Vitreous), was young and naive, Samine has been around the adventuring circuit and has decided community is vastly more important

than treasure. (Although she also appreciates a good pie.) She's actually missing her left arm, which I never mention in this particular story, but the description of how she manipulates objects takes it into account. Tome for Tea is an origin story for how these two characters meet, but they feature as main characters in a graphic novel I've been working on called *Assuming You Survive*.

Likewise, unusual fantasy creatures! Where did you first learn about a pakhangba?

I was looking for characters that would shake up how people thought about the regular mix of fantasy creatures. Since most western people aren't familiar with a pakhangba, they don't come to it with pre-conceived notions. Ulengamba is not The Pakhangba of Manipur, obviously, but he is descended from a long line of shape-changing dragons that draw power from community. I liked that for Ulen. He gets to find someplace he belongs and become stronger for it, and it ties to the overall theme of found family.

Do you have a favorite tea?

My familiar tea of comfort is decaf Constant Comment. The citrus is understated, and if you steep it just right it's not bitter at all and is enjoyable without sugar. Unless you're talking about cold tea, in which case I skew in the opposite direction. Then I'll take a fully

sugared, fully caffeinated Thai tea. With boba, if available.

You're Always Welcome Here

By Alicia Adams

> This story is the second installment of an ongoing series of interrelated stories that is being serialized by Hearth Stories. The first installment, "Dandelion," was featured in Issue One.

Lavender opened the door of her pine-tree home into the dark early morning, where the moon cast its solitary light over the meadow. The first blue light of morning dimmed the stars, and dew drops like giant tears lay over everything, bending blades of grass and the delicate slouching petals of the meadow flowers. She held Morning Glory in his sling across her chest, his arms and legs limp and dangling. His tiny eyes darted behind closed eyelids, turning every motion into dream.

Lavender pushed aside the pinecone that hid her doorway in the Jeffrey pine from the view of animals. The pinecone, though only four inches high, was taller than Lavender's door, which could be

completely hidden behind it. In the early light, Lavender could see as far as the red barn in the distance, and even beyond that to the white farm house where the human family lived. Most of the folk lived closer to these huge buildings or in them. But when they'd married, Basil had wanted them to live on the outskirts, closer to the forest, where it was quiet.

It was only quiet if you didn't listen. In the early dawn, the chirp of crickets filled the air. Lavender heard rustling in the grass and the wind weaving through plants, the horror of owls hooting in the dark treeline.

She picked up a big, clay bucket from the doorway and walked out into the gray meadow. Morning Glory's head rested against her heart. His eyelashes fluttered as she walked through the tall grass, pushing big spheres of morning dew into her bucket with both hands. The dew drops gleamed silver and blue in the early light before she splashed them into the bucket. She did her best to keep Morning Glory dry, but she couldn't help splashing herself. Her long gray mourning dress and her midnight-black hair were covered with tiny drops of water that glittered in the dawn light. She filled bucket after bucket, bringing the water to a barrel in the house, feeling the water seep into her dress and onto her skin—cold and wet and miserable.

The rooster crowed in the distance as the light stretched up and west and the morning birds began their chatter. Lavender looked up from her work and saw a figure walking toward her across the meadow.

In her sleepiness she could have sworn it was Basil, but that only lasted a moment.

Lavender watched the figure approach. It was a woman, she saw. Her straw-colored hair was in a long, messy braid. She wore a green cape, with a lump under it that might have been a pack or might have been a hump in her spine. She carried a staff sharpened to a point at the end and wore a big leaf on her head to shield her from the sun.

The woman waved and quickened her step. She was broad-faced and sunburnt. Long, straw-colored whiskers lined her jawbone—six, perfectly spaced whiskers, each longer than a finger. The woman ran the last two feet and smiled big at Lavender, panting for breath. She was a head shorter than Lavender and looked even smaller hunched over and panting.

"Am I glad to see you!" the woman said. She had an accent that Lavender had never heard before, and she reeked of sweat and alcohol. "The name's Sugar Maple." She turned her back to show two lines of sugar maple seeds stuck to her cape with sap. The seeds were winged pairs the size of Lavender's arms. Some of the seed pairs were new and green and some brown with age.

"Oh," Lavender said. She'd never met folk with tree names. She'd never met a stranger person ever. "My name is Lavender," she said. Then, unsure if it was a grim custom for the strange woman, showed Sugar Maple a lavender seed from her pocket. "This is Morning Glory. Would you please come inside for tea?"

"I don't mean to bother you and your baby, ma'am," Sugar Maple said. "But would it be okay if I set up my tent nearby?"

Lavender knew she should say yes and let it be that. It was polite enough. She could sense the stranger was offering her a way out of customary hospitality, a way to just have space for herself and the baby. But something deep in Lavender wanted the strange woman to stay.

She thought through her next words carefully. "You may, of course," she said. "But if you're not too tired from your travels, I've just gathered fresh water. You should come in and have some." She folded her hands around Morning Glory's sleeping form. She knew she must look a mess—a young widow with a baby, unkempt, damp in her gray dress, her gray eyes pleading for the woman to stay.

To Lavender's shock, Sugar Maple clutched her belly and shook with laughter. The baby woke up and looked around with curiosity.

"Well, I don't mean to take advantage of your generosity, missus, but surely I will!" the traveler bellowed. "It's sure cold out, and if you've got some food and a nice warm place to sleep, I'd stay on with you and the littl'un for some time if you'll have me!"

"Sure!" Lavender said, feeling herself brighten at the prospect. "If you don't mind a crying baby, I have an extra bed with no one to sleep in it and plenty of food and water for a guest. Please come in. You're wet and must be tired. You'll have tea, won't you? And breakfast?"

Sugar Maple howled with more laughter, her red cheeks turning redder above the light, floppy whiskers. "Lavender, my dear, I think we're going to make great company!"

Lavender ushered the strange woman into her home and rolled the pinecone back into place. The sweet smell of Jeffrey pine greeted them as they walked through the door, and Lavender watched as Sugar Maple sniffed at the air and smiled.

"A lovely home!" Sugar Maple yelled, as if not realizing that Lavender was right beside her. Lavender had never met a louder person. Morning Glory wouldn't take his eyes off the strange woman as Lavender took him out of the sling and held him on her hip.

"Oh, thank you," Lavender said, but she didn't think of it as lovely. A couple chairs, a small cooking area, a table, and two little nooks with beds in them. Modest, she'd say. "We don't get a lot of visitors."

"You and the babe?"

"Right."

Sugar Maple took off her hat and cape and the pack that had been obscured beneath it. She walked over to the little window and looked out at the healthy green basil plants growing there. "That's your partner there?" she said.

"Mm-hmm."

"Basil." Sugar Maple said.

Lavender's chest tightened hearing his name. "Mm-hmm." She held Morning Glory closer.

Sugar Maple looked back at Lavender, her face serious. "It's hard to lose a partner so young. I lost

mine, too. Many years ago now. It gets easier. But not easy."

Lavender nodded. It was a phrase she'd heard before, but the truth of it struck her coming from the stranger. "Let me get you that tea," she said. She grabbed towels for herself and her guest and heated the water in the hearth—a carved out section of the tree, lined with clay and with a small vent at the top. She came back with two clay cups of mild nettle tea, two bowls of hot cereal, and one red raspberry to share.

When she set these on the dining table in front of her guest, Sugar Maple clapped her hands over her mouth. Her shoulders bounced up and down. Lavender couldn't tell if she was suppressing sobs or joy.

"Is everything okay?" she said.

Sugar Maple uncovered her mouth to reveal a huge grin. "Hot food!" she shouted. "I haven't had hot food in ages. This is mighty kind of you!" And with that, Sugar Maple dove into the cereal, little bits of it flying everywhere and sticking from the long whiskers on her chin. Lavender smiled. Such a strange person, but her home felt warmer with her in it.

Lavender brought Morning Glory to her chest, and let him suckle while she pulled off raspberry drupelets one by one and sipped her tea.

"Where are you coming from?" Lavender asked.

"The mountain," Sugar Maple said between spoonfuls.

"The mountain!" Lavender gasped. Lavender had often looked up at the mountain while out collecting

fruit and seeds in the field. It was big on the horizon, snow-capped, and countless miles in the distance. She hadn't even known there were folk so high up.

"That's right," Sugar Maple said. She licked the bottom of her bowl and then started tearing into the raspberry.

"Get some more. Please, help yourself," Lavender said in knee-jerk politeness. She didn't want to talk about food; she wanted to talk about how Sugar Maple had traveled all the way down the mountain and across the world to be sitting at her table.

"Thanks so much, Ma'am. This here cereal is delicious. And I don't say that lightly." Sugar Maple got out of her chair and walked over to the big pot of cereal.

"Thanks. But tell me, how did you get all this way? The mountain is miles away. On hazy days, you can't even see it from here."

"Oh yeah, it was foggy for a few days, and I watched my whole mountain disappear. Scared me close to death, I tell you."

"How did you get down the mountain? Were you at the top?"

"Yep, up near the top. Just rode a bird down, is all. Would have taken forever to walk it."

Now Lavender understood. She laughed. "You're making fun of me." She switched Morning Glory to her other breast.

Sugar Maple set her second bowl of cereal down on the table and sat. She stared intently at Lavender, her broad face serious. "Now I promise you, Lavender. You took me into your home. You gave

me a good place to sleep and this delicious food to eat. I'm not never gonna lie to you. Not now, not ever."

"You're serious?" Lavender said, sure that at any moment Sugar Maple would start that belly laugh again, that she would be the butt of some joke. "Really, how could a person ride a bird?"

"I've ridden a few birds in my time," Sugar Maple said, digging into her bowl of hot cereal again. "It's long work, but it's worth the time. Freer than you'll ever feel is up on a bird. Freer and more terrified, too. But that thrill! Worth the danger to feel that thrill of flying through the air. Of being higher up than anyone's ever been."

"But how?" Lavender pressed. She was leaning forward now and had to remind herself to lean back, to give Morning Glory enough room beside the table.

"Well, I recommend you find a bird that eats seeds, not one that eats little creatures like you and me. That's a good start. And give it some seeds, too, that's for sure. But really you want to find one with a problem. Birds are reasonable creatures. They'll make a trade. One bird I freed from being stuck in some tangled vines and the like. That didn't take too long, but I didn't have nowhere to go, so just flew and flew around. To get down the mountain I found a bird with lotsa mites on him. Spent a whole afternoon pulling off mites, throwing 'em down on the forest floor. Poor bird was covered with red, itchy skin, but by the time I was done with him, he didn't have a single mite or mite egg left on him. He was free."

Lavender's mouth hung open. "And then you just got on his back? You got on his back and flew down a mountain?"

"Yep." Sugar Maple finished her bowl and rubbed the extra off her face with both hands. Then she rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Listen. There was no good place to camp last night. I spent all of the dark hours working my way through that fen on the other side of the farm. So I haven't slept in a spell. Would it be alright if I got a few hours now? Then we can chat again when I wake up? If it's too much of a burden to be in your space, I'm happy to set up the tent, but don't worry about noise or nothing. At this point I could sleep through the end of the world."

"Of course," Lavender said. She tried to hide her disappointment. Riding a bird! How could someone sleep at a moment like this?

But Sugar Maple slept for hours.

Lavender went out foraging with Morning Glory as she always did. The way she would if it were an ordinary day and not a day where someone who rode a flying bird down a mountain slept in her own home.

She imagined herself pulling mites off a great brown bird, holding the wriggling terrors in her hand before dropping them to the earth. Her face pressed against the feathers. Walking around huge flapping wings. And then, at last, climbing on the back of the great creature. Holding on to dearest life as the bird jumped into the air and spread its wings! The wind on

her face faster than any wind, and the dizzying view of her Jeffrey pine, the barn, the farm house, the pond, all tiny specks below her. She imagined herself lost in a cloud, pure white and then gray and trembling with thunder.

She trembled thinking about it as she used her ceramic knife to cut free a curly white oyster mushroom from the bark of a dying aspen. But the trembling subsided as she pushed the mushroom into her bag and went to cut a second one. She wanted to feel that kind of thrill. *Worth the danger to feel the thrill*, Sugar Maple had said. She heard the twittering of birds high up in the canopy over her head. Heard their beating wings. She had never looked at a bird with anything but fear. She had never seen them for how beautiful they were, how extraordinary.

A crow cawed above her, and Lavender tightened her grip on Morning Glory. Extraordinary, yes, but still dangerous.

It was one of the world's slowest days. She let Morning Glory play on a woven mat with some of the toys she had carved for him. She set him on his belly and watched him hold up his head. She listened to him cry and bounced him on her knee. Just the two of them, just like any other day. But she listened to the deep breathing from the other room, and she waited.

Lavender had had plenty of visitors. She listened to them talk about Basil and how much they missed

him. Accepted their food. Accepted their hugs and their pats on her arm. Watched as they held the baby. Refused when they offered to watch him so she could get some sleep. She felt dull and restless when they came over. She wasn't sure what made this visitor different. She wanted to hear this one talk, to hear more of her adventures, but it was more than that. She wanted this visitor to like her. She wanted her to stay a while. And more than anything, she wanted Sugar Maple to wake up. *Wake up!* she screamed at her in her thoughts. *Wake up!* And it was so loud in her head that she wondered if Sugar Maple could hear it.

Sugar Maple didn't stir until dusk. Morning Glory was already asleep, and Lavender, as she did most evenings, stood at the window watching the basil leaves grow. If she unfocused her eyes and waited, she was sure she could see them growing taller, bit by bit.

"Umph, how long was I out?" Sugar Maple grumbled, coming out of the little room and wiping her eyes.

"A long time," Lavender said. "The day's about over. Are you hungry? Would you like more tea?"

"Tea? No. No, thanks. Puts me right to sleep, nettle tea. Should have remembered. But if you've got food, I'll take some."

Lavender washed a full mushroom cap and smothered it in oil and spices before cooking it up on

a clay pan in the hearth. It smelled like a feast, more like a party than a small dinner.

"Was the bed alright?" Lavender asked over the sound of sizzling food.

"Best bed of my whole life," Sugar Maple said, stretching. She yawned. "Almost want to crawl back in it."

"You're welcome to," Lavender said, hoping she wouldn't.

"Nah, nah, I'm up. And now that I've smelled dinner, I wouldn't miss it for the world." Sugar Maple walked over to her pack and pulled out a glass bottle full of yellow liquid. "Lavender, my friend, would you like some dandelion wine?" She opened the bottle and let the sharp, floral smell fill the room.

"I'd love some. Thank you," Lavender said. She'd never had dandelion wine, but she would have said yes to anything. She brought two clay cups to the table, and Sugar Maple filled them near to the brim.

Lavender finished cooking the mushroom and brought it to the table. She served Sugar Maple enough to fill a whole plate. It barely made a dent in the mushroom. She took a smaller piece for herself.

Lavender smelled the wine—sour and strong—and lifted her cup. "To adventures!" she said.

"To friendship!" Sugar Maple said.

Lavender beamed, her cheeks feeling hot and red.

They tapped their cups together and drank. The wine was bitter, but Lavender made herself swallow. Across from her, Sugar Maple downed half the cup.

"Ah, good stuff," Sugar Maple said.

"*Very* good." The light had seeped out of the room, so Lavender lit candles and placed them on the table between them. "I've been waiting all day to hear more about your journey, Sugar Maple. Where are you going?"

"To the sea!" Sugar Maple sang.

"The sea?"

"The sea! The sea!" Sugar Maple's eyes were wide, her hands gesticulated wildly. "Have you not heard of the sea? Like hundreds upon hundreds of ponds all put together! But water you can't drink, and water that moves and tries to push you down and pull you in."

"Why would you go *there*?" Lavender said. It sounded terrible.

"From the sea you can see the whole world," Sugar Maple said. "The humans have built ships—they're like big houses that go on the water. And on a ship you can travel across the sea and visit different lands."

"What's in the different lands?" Lavender asked. The candles flickered.

"That's what I want to find out."

"But then how do *you* know? Surely someone must have told you about these different lands." Lavender downed another gulp of bitter wine.

"I've heard stories, yes. All incredible. Different kinds of folk. Folk with different languages and customs. Different animals, too. And plants. Even the humans are different across the sea."

"You're just going to have a look?"

Sugar Maple laughed her full-body laugh and finished her cup of wine. She poured herself another. "Yes," she said. "I'm going to look. Before my life is through, I want to see as much of the world as I can."

"Even if you die at sea? With no one to plant you?" Lavender shuddered.

"Even so," Sugar Maple said. "But that's me. I want to know about you."

Lavender shifted in her seat. "Nothing to tell," she said. "I haven't done much of anything."

"I thought we were going to be honest with each other," Sugar Maple said. She gave Lavender another serious look.

Lavender took another drink. "I *do* want to be honest with you," she said. She looked down into the yellow liquid in her cup. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know all about you. All about you and the life you live and have lived. Tell me what it's like to live in a house between a farm and a forest. Tell me about Lavender."

So Lavender told Sugar Maple about growing up near the farm. She told her about the friends she had growing up. About her parents and her brothers. How everyone knew she and Basil were going to get together, even before she knew herself. How Basil wanted to live right here, on the outskirts, where he claimed it would be quiet. How he climbed the Jeffrey pine soon after they moved in to get a view out over the forest and then somehow (she would never know for sure) he slipped and fell to the earth—with a cracking thud she would never forget. How

even in her grief she followed the customs—pulled the basil seeds from his pockets and placed them on his body when she buried him. How she watered him and tended the plants that grew. How she kept everyone away and gave birth alone.

And she told her all about Morning Glory. The way he strained so hard to be mobile. The fascination he had for bugs and worms. How he instinctively knew to stay quiet outside, a born survivor. "Did you have any children?" she asked Sugar Maple.

"No. I wanted kids, but when my partner died I decided that part of my life was over. We were well suited, my partner and I. I didn't think I'd find that kind of connection with anyone else. I've just been traveling, trying things. I want to know what else there is to life. But I envy you. Morning Glory is beautiful. You're a wonderful mom to him."

Lavender blushed. "Thank you," she said.

Sugar Maple finished another cup. She refilled Lavender's cup and then her own. "Well, the wine is gone, but I don't want to stop talking."

Lavender smiled. "Me neither."

"Good! I've got one last bottle. It's ours! Let's finish it up under the stars!"

"Okay!" A small cry came from the cradle where Morning Glory was sleeping. "Give me a moment to check on the baby," she said. "And I'll meet you out there."

Lavender held Morning Glory in her arms. She smelled his head and stroked his soft, fine hair with her fingertips. Then she dipped a clean cloth in a jar of breast milk she'd expressed earlier that day and let

him suck, as she had seen some of the other mothers do on festival days. He looked confused at first, but the more she dipped, the more he got used to it. When his eyes closed and he wouldn't drink anymore, she burped him and set him back down in his cradle. His little arms raised over his head in victory. She kissed his cheek and walked back out to the main room, where she blew out what remained of the candles and walked outside.

Sugar Maple whispered, "I've brought out this blanket, is that okay?"

It was a small, rough-knit blanket in brown and gray that Lavender had hand knit in the months after Basil's death. "Yes," she said.

Sugar Maple unfurled the blanket and put it over her knees. She motioned for Lavender to sit beside her. Lavender had to sit right up close to Sugar Maple to fit under the blanket. Their arms and legs touched.

"Is this too close?" Lavender whispered. "I can grab another blanket."

"Not too close for me."

Lavender smiled as Sugar Maple handed her her cup.

"I've been enjoying these stars on my journey," Sugar Maple said, looking up. The stars twinkled bright in the sky, surrounding a bright full moon. "They keep me company on my days alone."

"Do you like traveling alone?" Lavender said. She took a big swallow of wine.

"Sometimes I do. Sometimes I miss talking so much I end up talking to myself for days at a time. It's nice to have a real person to talk to for a while."

Lavender could just make out Sugar Maple's smile in the dark.

"It's weird," Lavender said. "My family comes by. The neighbors come. Old friends come. They bring food. They make sure Morning Glory and I are okay. They tell stories about Basil, and they hold the baby for a while. And the moment they come, I want them to leave. I don't have anything to say to them. I just want to be alone." Lavender pulled the blanket up higher so that the course fibers rubbed her chin. "But I don't feel that with you. Since you've been here, I haven't felt like a widow, or even a mother. I feel like a person."

Sugar Maple wiped below her eyes, and Lavender thought she saw the gleam of tears. She put her arm around Lavender, and Lavender let her head rest on her shoulder. "It's a hard road," Sugar Maple said. Lavender wasn't sure which of their roads she meant. "I know what you mean. I feel happy to be here with you; I feel like myself again. I wish I could stay, for your sake and for mine. I wish I could rest here, but I can't."

"I know," Lavender said. "I understand. I wasn't asking you to stay."

"But I want to. Know that I want to."

Lavender could hear Sugar Maple's heartbeat through her shoulder. She could feel the cool drops of tears in her hair. Around them, the crickets chirruped and leapt through the grass. The moon and stars blurred in her vision. From alcohol or from tears, she wasn't sure. She didn't think she'd started to cry.

"Oh, look," Sugar Maple said.

From the folds of darkness, a bright white moth appeared. It twirled and danced in the dark, bathed in moon glow. It was huge, almost a third of Lavender's size, half of Sugar Maple's. Lavender cuddled in close to Sugar Maple, safe and warm under the blanket. They watched the moth dip and twirl, fluttering, catching the warm white light on its delicate wings.

But then the darkness moved, and a massive bat swooped at the moth. The moth dived low and escaped into the treeline.

Lavender jumped to her feet, and the two women scurried inside and covered the door. She saw the bat disappear in the treeline as she slammed the door shut.

Sugar Maple started to laugh her big, booming, house-shaking laugh.

Lavender laughed too, wiping her own eyes. "We shouldn't laugh!" she cried. "We could have been killed by that thing!" She imagined the big hairy animal flying toward them as they sat, oblivious, beneath the blanket. She imagined Morning Glory waking up in the morning with no one there to pick him up. What had she been thinking going outside at night? Her own laughter stopped as Sugar Maple's rolled on. Eventually the neighbors would have come, she thought. From the door, they would have heard Morning Glory crying and come in to help. She should be nicer to the neighbors when they came. She should let them stay and talk about Basil, if that's what they wanted.

"What a wild night," Sugar Maple said, her laughter dying down.

"We left the wine outside," Lavender said. "I think it spilled."

"That's okay," Sugar Maple said. "I'll make more."

They stood facing each other in the dark. "I don't want this night to end," Lavender said. "But I think it has."

Sugar Maple reached out and held Lavender's hand in both of hers. "It's been a good night. I'll see you in the morning."

Lavender walked into the kitchen with Morning Glory on her hip. She had overslept and had woken to the sound of Morning Glory's cries, the rooster crowing in the distance, and the sound of a boiling pot on the hearth.

Sugar Maple stood stirring over a bubbling pot. The table was a mess of yellow dandelion petals and toppled over sacks of powders that smelled both sweet and tangy. They were orange and white and black.

"Good morning," Lavender said, sitting at the table with Morning Glory on her lap and holding her throbbing head in her free hand.

"Good morning!" Sugar Maple sang. "I'm making more dandelion wine. I didn't think through all the steps. There are lots and lots of steps! Over the first

few days, then months. If I leave them with you, could you tend to some bottles?"

"What?" Lavender said, looking up at Sugar Maple, whose voice was so loud it made her head ache. "Oh, sure. I can do that."

"Great," Sugar Maple said. She took the pot off the hearth. "I'll be off soon, I'm afraid. But I'll walk you through the steps before I go." She turned to face Lavender, and Lavender saw that her braid had come loose.

"Sugar Maple," Lavender said. "Come sit by me. You can tell me the steps while I braid your hair."

"You don't have to do that," Sugar Maple said.

"I would like to." Lavender went to her room and grabbed a hairbrush and the baby cradle. She set Morning Glory in the cradle and motioned for Sugar Maple to sit on the floor in front of her chair.

Sugar Maple sat. Lavender unravelled the braid, pulling out bits of grass and dirt as she found them. "You can bathe before you go. It wouldn't take you long."

"No, it's time for me to go. If I get too comfortable, I'll stay another day. And then another. And if I wait too long, the snow will come before I ever reach the sea. But let me tell you the steps to making dandelion wine."

Lavender brushed through Sugar Maple's long golden hair and listened to the many steps of how to make dandelion wine. There was stirring multiple times a day for two weeks. Then straining, releasing gases while fermenting, siphoning, changing containers, and then doing it all again every three

months for nine months. Lavender felt overwhelmed. Maybe she wouldn't make wine after all.

"Then you funnel it into the bottles and close them up. Let them sit in there for at least a year."

"I'm so sorry we spilled that wine!" Lavender said. "If I'd known it was the product of *two years* of labor, I would have braved the bat and saved the bottle!"

"No, no," Sugar Maple said. "It's easy! You just have to remember when to do each step." Sugar Maple shifted her weight as Lavender finished the braid and tied it off. She turned around and looked at Lavender, her long whiskers brushing against Lavender's leg. "And I was thinking," Sugar Maple continued. "Maybe we can have another night like this one. Maybe in two years I will have seen enough of the sea and the lands beyond them. And then I could head back this way."

"Oh," Lavender said. She smiled. "I would like that."

"Then let's make it happen! This isn't goodbye. Just until next time!"

Lavender offered her hand and helped Sugar Maple to her feet. "I would like to see you again," she said. "But if you're happy out there, don't come back for me. We'll be fine."

"I know you'll be fine," Sugar Maple said, still holding Lavender's hand. "I'd like to come back anyway."

Lavender pushed aside the pinecone by the door with Morning Glory sitting on one hip. She watched as Sugar Maple placed the green cape covered with sugar maple seeds over her back, strapped a leaf over her head like a hat, and gripped her sharpened walking stick. *Such a strange-looking traveler*, Lavender thought. She smiled. She'd almost forgotten. "I'm really happy to have met you," she said.

"I'm happy to have met you, too," Sugar Maple said, and she gave a small smile, different from all the others. Her voice was quiet. "Meeting you has been the very best part of my journey so far."

"I doubt that."

"It's true!"

Lavender tightened her grip on Morning Glory and started bouncing him, even though he wasn't fussing. "Then be sure to come back. Anytime. You're always welcome here."

"I'll be back before you know it."

"That soon?"

"Yes."

Lavender bent low and hugged Sugar Maple. Sugar Maple wrapped her arms around both Lavender and Morning Glory.

"Stay safe out there," Lavender said.

"Be good to yourself," Sugar Maple said. "And your littl'un." She kissed Morning Glory on the head, gave Lavender a sad smile, and turned to go.

Lavender didn't like seeing Sugar Maple leave, but she stayed and watched as her friend marched through the tall grasses of the meadow, watched her tiny form get smaller and smaller. The wind blew so that the basil, the flowers, and all the grasses looked as if they were waving. Lavender held up Morning Glory's hand, and the two of them waved and waved until the small speck that was Sugar Maple disappeared over the horizon, and it was just Lavender and Morning Glory again, just like any other day. But it was different now, too. Behind them, huge and covered with snow was a mountain. Before them, miles and miles away, was something called the sea. Today they would go and visit the neighbors. And two years in the future, Morning Glory would be running around on his own. The dandelion wine would be ready. And maybe, just maybe, Sugar Maple would find her way back.

As they walked back to the door in the Jeffrey pine, Lavender heard birds calling to each other in the trees. "Listen, Morning Glory," she said, holding his tiny hand in hers. "Can you hear them? The birds are singing."

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Bitter Tea

By A. Emery Watkins

The frog witch's demeanor took on only subtle changes at her visitor's request, but these each carried substantial weight. Her eyelids lowered, just a touch, over her fist-sized eyes. Only the farthest corners of her wide mouth curled down. Her warty, stunted green form hunched just a bit more at the shoulders. Each such change seemed to turn the temperature of her little hut up by a few degrees, then a few more, and a few more still until the man simply stood up from her table and walked back out into the swamp, his shame forming a wet triangle across the shirt on his back.

"A love potion," the witch muttered. She shook her head. "Why not ask the blacksmith for a set of shackles? It would cost far less."

She rose to re-light the incense on her chest of drawers. Such impure thoughts as the man had harbored needed to be cleansed from the air. As she blew a little flame back onto its charred end, she saw

that the stack of those fragrant sticks was already growing short again, a testament to a newfound necessary frequency of such cleansings. That time, it appeared, was close again.

Another knock came at her door just as the smoke began to curl. Her temper flared until she saw who was now calling: the local sorcerer, there for their weekly conversation. "Hello, Pilpa," she thus said. "Was our tea date today? I'd forgotten."

The man smiled and stepped inside. On his shoulder sat a faceless wooden human doll, its joints connected only by string yet sitting stiffly upright. One of its cuplike hands clutched at the man's long hair. "Was that Yanu I saw walking away just now?"

"Yes," she replied.

He awaited an elaboration that never came. In the end, he smiled wider and pulled himself out a chair while the witch put the kettle on.

"What is that thing?" she asked, once the water began to heat. "On your shoulder."

In response, he put a hand palm-up near the doll. After a few seconds, its stiff fist relaxed and let free his hair, and its legs stretched just enough for the peg-like feet to make contact with this offered surface. From there, it stood on his palm, and he carefully moved it to the witch's table, where it hopped off and began to roam.

The witch watched all this with a still face. "Some kind of machine?"

"Maybe. I don't know yet."

"You don't know? Did you find it somewhere?"

He shook his head. "It's a project of mine that I wanted to show you. My daughter has been carving these kinds of dolls a lot lately, and for the fun of it I tried infusing some with various spells."

"And this one came to life."

Pilpa began to nod but he caught himself. "Well, something like that."

The witch's wide eyes tracked the figure as it cantered across the table. It ran first to one edge, where it leaned forward and peered at the floor beneath. Then it ran to the opposite edge and put a hand to its smooth brow as though to gaze at the rusting pot-belly stove currently heating the kettle. It had no eyes, no nerves, but it seemed to see, to feel.

"Clearly it lives, Pilpa," the witch eventually said. "How can you think otherwise?"

Now the sorcerer shrugged. He began to run a hand up and down one of his silken sleeves. "It is a doll. I gave it energy, true, but does a hammer live when it's wielded by a carpenter?"

The kettle began to whistle at this moment. The witch lifted it and extinguished the flame heating it, then carried it to a reed mat at the table center. "Of course it does," she replied. She found in her packed cabinet two cups and their associated saucers, which she set at both of their places to await the brewing tea.

Pilpa's eyebrow rose. "You believe so?"

"It surprises me more that you don't." Her chair's thin legs whispered when she sat. "Maybe it's borrowed life, but a hammer sitting idle on a table is not the same as a hammer pounding nails, after all. So

if a hammer can live, then that"—she pointed to the doll, which was tapping at various places on the kettle's exterior—"certainly lives as well."

Her friend eyed her. "Interesting."

"What, then? What distinguishes, to you, something that lives and something that doesn't?"

The man made to say something, but halted. After a few moments passed, he poured them both cups of steaming gold liquid, and he set the kettle down with an effortful gentleness. His fingers began to tap the tabletop, and his lips pursed in thought.

"You see?" the witch said. "It isn't so simple."

"Well, I suppose I always assumed merely that something must be born in order to be alive."

The frog sipped her tea. It tasted like soil, with a sharp and bitter aftertaste donated by dried berries picked from the swamp edges. Most humans did not enjoy it, so it was a measure of their tolerance when they chose to drink it anyway. "Birthing applies some special property, then?"

He nodded.

"And what property is that?"

"Some special kind of magic, I suppose. But of course, I don't know for certain."

The wooden figure approached the witch's cup and peered inside. It tapped at a floating bit of stray berry a few times, then reached in and pulled it out, holding it this way and that while tilting its head.

"I wonder if it isn't cultural," she said as she watched it.

Pilpa's head mimicked the doll's. "Pardon?"

Her hand circled in the air. "I may have told you this before, but in this part of the world, when new humans come to know of me, your immediate reaction is disbelief. Something about a creature that looks different than you walking upright and speaking throws you off-kilter. And now you tell me that a living doll—one to whom you gave life via some special kind of magic, as you put it—is not truly alive, for reasons you cannot explain."

Her friend considered this for a long while. His doll continued to fuss about, but soon enough ran out of things of interest on the tabletop and so sat down, cross-legged, and went rigid and still once more. "I think I understand. But then, where do you draw the line? If even a hammer can live for a time, when is something not alive?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I might ask you, why draw such a line in the first place?"

His hands spread. "Because we are empathetic creatures by nature."

The witch stared up at him with skepticism. "Go on."

The man sipped again at his tea. The cup clacked this time when he set it back down. "In our culture—as in all human cultures, I would hazard—the most heinous thing is to kill someone. But we also know that to kill is to survive. So if we granted to all things the same level of respect and status as we grant to ourselves, the simple act of living would be too emotionally painful to continue. Even to disturb the dust as we walk through a room would be an act of

violence. So we must draw boundaries between things we love and things we do not."

Her expression softened. She turned her gaze into her drink. "You must think that a clever answer," she then replied. "But this isn't always about survival. I have seen many times when a human has killed another human solely for financial gain, or for respectability within the tribe, or some other petty thing."

"Are those things not related to survival?"

Her tongue snapped up a berry. "Tangentially, I suppose. But people are strongest when they work together. I think many people merely relish praise and authority. That young man, for instance: do you know what he asked me for, just before you saw him walking away from here?" Her pupils rose to meet his. "A love potion. To sway a woman he wishes to marry."

The sorcerer laughed. "Is that so?"

And the witch nodded with solemnity.

For a time, Pilpa gave her a wry look, scratching at some emerging chin hairs with his index and middle finger. But he chose not to explain yet what was on his mind, and instead chose to return to the previous subject. "So, to you, is the 'life' of a hammer just as important as a human life?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You want to entrap me. I do not care about the relative importance of things. That is a subjective matter. I suggest only that all things merit respect."

He spread his hands. "But how does one properly demonstrate that respect? If I need to eat, I may have

to kill a rabbit or two. More, should I need to feed my family. Is that disrespectful to the rabbits?"

"No, because it was done out of need."

"Ah."

The witch examined the sorcerer through her shadowed eyes. "So you are starting to understand?"

He folded his hands on the table and leaned forward. "If everything is alive, and therefore everything has value, then we should try to act only out of need, to respect the integrity of living things. In this way, we can avoid the kind of crippling guilt that we would incur just by living our lives. Is that what you believe?"

A breath escaped her nose. The suspicion now fully lifted from her wide face, and her gaze drew inward. "Curious."

"What's that?"

The witch considered the new thought through another sip of tea. "You made me realize something, is all. That you also believe that some things simply cannot be alive, and therefore would never, under any circumstances, merit respect."

The sorcerer laughed. "Come, now."

"Are you grateful to be alive?"

"Of course."

"To whom, though?"

Now he shrugged. "To my parents, I suppose, who gave me life."

"Not to the earth? The sky, the water, the sun?"

Another grin threatened to grow. "I suppose, to those things as well, yes."

"Are the earth, the sky, the water, and the sun alive, then, to merit this gratitude?"

The sorcerer finished the remnants of his cooling tea and poured himself another cup. He filled the witch's as well when she tipped it forward. "I suppose I never thought to ask them. But this is why I enjoy talking to you."

The witch watched the still figure on her tabletop. She wondered what the other villagers thought of such experiments, and whether or not the idea of it being alive would make them fear the doll. She wondered if her friend's daughter, who carved the doll, was delighted or terrified to see one of her creations become animate. Human children often treated their toys like they were alive, even if they didn't truly believe they were, but it seemed a short bridge into the uncanny. And that bridge shortened with age.

"You know," she said, "I have only had a little over a decade to call this swamp my home."

"Is that right? I knew only that you were here before we came."

She nodded. "Yes. But before, I lived to the east, by a bog pool near Vinby. And before that I lived along the river, where Getan is now. And before that elsewhere still."

Pilpa regarded her as she sorted through her memories.

"At Getan, they wanted the land by the river. The place I had built my hut then was on the edge of the flood plain, where silts gathered and enriched the soil. Those who came to settle the area always

regarded me with suspicion, but it wasn't until they began to construct mills that they came with their torches.

"The bog pool was less desirable for a time, and distant enough from where they built Vinby that those people saw me mostly as a curiosity. Like the people here, they would sometimes come to ask for blessings or medicine or charms, and, if it was within my power, and if I deemed their causes worthy of my time, I would grant them these things.

"Every group of people has a proportion of rotten souls, however, and as the population grows that proportion comes to represent a larger and larger number. At some point in that growth, their requests become obscene—cursing an ex-lover, making a neighbor ill, wilting a rival farmer's crops or sending upon it a cloud of locusts. I have to close myself off from them then, or else risk their violence when I refuse to do their bidding. But, in closing myself off I become once again strange, and soon they decide that they need the waters of all of the surrounding bog pools drained to make more farmland, or they need to clear the forests to raise cattle, or, or, or. That time, near Getan, I left before I smelled the smoke."

Pilpa sat still with his hands around his warm cup. "Their requests became obscene. Like asking for you to make a love potion."

And she nodded.

His gaze drifted, then, to her small dirty window. "Do you know Yanu? Has he come here before now?"

"No, thank the stars."

He began to tap his fingernails on the porcelein. "His family went bankrupt recently. His father inherited the family stables, but was never much good at managing them or taking good care of the horses. They lost their home and ended up living in a friend's attic. Six of them: the father, the mother, Yanu, and Yanu's three sisters. Without work, Yanu's father took to drinking and gambling, putting them even further into debt and turning that attic into a little corner of hell.

"This girl Yanu wants to fall in love with him: she is not wealthy herself, but he loves her dearly. Yet he also views her as an escape, a means to join another family and begin life anew. I imagine that is why he came to visit you."

She topped off his cup with the last of the tea in the pot. "What are you trying to tell me?"

The sorcerer shook his head. "I don't know. The people in those cities were wrong to chase you out. They failed to give you the respect you deserve. And Yanu, asking for such a heinous thing, is clearly following in their footsteps. But they all, too, are living things, heinous desires or no, and they all have their own stories."

"If you are trying to make me feel sympathy for such a boggart, you are failing."

He laughed. "I would never attempt such a thing."

Each sat in silence for a time. Wagtails hopped about the grass outside, letting free periodic chirps. The swamp would soon become noisy when the waterfowls' breeding season began again. Ducks and geese and coots, fending each other off from their

little slices of territory so they could lay their eggs in peace. Herons floating back in on their noisy wings, spearing the fish with their weaponized faces. It only seemed to balance because none of them ever thought to take full control. What might happen if one of them had that inspiration, the witch didn't know.

Pilpa stretched. "I suppose I had better get back to town. Thank you again for the tea. Shall we meet the same time next week?"

The witch swallowed the contents of her cup, now cool and far more bitter than when it was fresh. "Of course, Pilpa. I look forward to it."

He put his hand out for the doll, which stood abruptly and stepped onto it to ride it again to his shoulder. "You aren't angry at me?"

"For what?"

"I didn't mean to imply that you shouldn't ever feel spiteful toward us. We have done much to merit that spite."

She grunted. "It is no bother. You are right that sometimes, in my rage, I can forget my own philosophy."

"Is there anything I can do?"

The witch gave this some thought. She tapped her webbed fingers on the tabletop, near where the doll had chosen to sit. "When next you run into Yanu," she then said, "tell him that I might be willing to see him, but only if he comes bearing an idea that would not require me to relieve the one he supposedly loves of her physical and mental autonomy. Tell him that

it is not she who must change in this situation, the little creodont."

Pilpa laughed. "Will do."

"And," the witch continued, "if you are able ..."

The sorcerer waited for her to dredge up the ponderous words.

"If you are able, please try to get the others to give that doll the respect it deserves, as a living thing."

A. E. WATKINS

A. E. Watkins is an American ex-pat, born in the Southwest, raised in the Midwest, and currently living in the United Kingdom, where he is employed as an astronomy research associate. While his workdays are spent mostly writing Python code in an effort to understand the myriad ways in which galaxies come to be the way they are, he unwinds by playing video games, watching movies, reading, drawing, taking long walks, and, of course, writing fiction.

Q&A with A. Emery Watkins

The following questions were posed by Erin Keating, author of *Green Water, Blue Water*, and are answered by A. Emery Watkins about their story *Bitter Tea*.

The conversation in this story takes place over an unusual tea: so bitter and earthy that it is difficult for humans to tolerate, and which only grows more so as it cools during the discussion. Why center the story around this tea?

> In the story, I was playing around with the idea of perspectives. The frog witch enjoys the tea, and most humans don't, but like any other kind of flavor, whether you enjoy it or not is a matter of perspective. So the phrase "bitter tea" hearkens to that idea: "bitter" doesn't necessarily mean "bad," even though that might be the first thought on hearing that word. One can always learn to enjoy bitter things

(something anyone who likes India Pale Ale could tell you).

Why did you choose not to name the frog witch, in comparison to naming Pilpa and Yanu, who are human?

It was a way to lend her more of a spiritual status (in my brain, she acts as a kind of minor deity to the people who live nearby). But also to link her with the focus of the discussion, the doll, which also has no name.

The frog witch and Pilpa work through many unanswerable questions in this story. How did you approach writing the story's conclusion, knowing that their questions wouldn't resolve?

Once I saw that the conversation was heading toward empathy, I knew the note I wanted to end it on.

Have you written or imagined some of the other discussions between the frog witch and Pilpa in their weekly tea dates?

Nope. Maybe someday I'll revisit them, but I tend to always start fresh when it comes to new stories.

Marginalia

By Morgan Welch

The morning air is warm. A little light makes it over the rooftops to catch the leaded windows, and Marjorie lingers on the doorstep, looking at the brightly-painted window-frames and doors of half-timber buildings. People hurry past, excited for the harvest.

Marjorie wants to be there too, but she also wants to commit this place to memory before she leaves. She stands in front of the herbalist's shop she's run the past six years—her home. She'll be back, but not for weeks or months; her father, who lives to the south beyond the forest, is unwell.

Most of the shops are closed today. Familiar sounds—the ring of the blacksmith's hammer falling, the merchants calling from the square—have been replaced by bustle, laughter, song.

Marjorie steps into the street and turns to check on Daphne. The swan follows, looking around. She

wears a small gold crown, not on her head, but like a collar at the base of her long neck.

"OK?"

The swan makes a low but rising whoop.

"OK. One minute."

Marjorie takes a key from a pouch on her belt. She locks the door and hefts her bag onto her shoulder. Rather than move with the rest of the crowd through the town towards the orchard, she goes to one of the lattice-paned windows of the shop and peers inside. It's difficult to see, but she can make out a room with a counter, shelves of glass jars and vials, dried herbs hanging from the ceiling.

The shelves are somewhat bare.

She steps back, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. No more sadness—it's the festival!

Daphne clacks her beak.

"OK, OK. Go on. Off you go."

The swan walks off, ungainly on her large, grey feet. As she follows, Marjorie thinks about the harvest festival—a celebration of fertility and life. Of love.

And she intends to celebrate with Rose, except ... afterwards, she has to leave. She wishes she could spend the night, but to reach the inn beyond the river before dark, she must set out straight after the feast.

In the square, long tables have been set up. There are covered platters of food, empty bowls to receive the fruits, pitchers of water, ale and damson wine.

The cobblestones are bright. Bunting flutters in a gentle breeze.

Daphne, some way ahead of Marjorie, wanders straight on, instead of turning down the road towards the orchard.

"Daphne! This way!"

The swan stops, looks around.

"This way!"

Daphne stretches her wings before starting back to where Marjorie is standing. Marjorie stretches out her fingertips, and when she's close enough, Daphne rubs her head and beak against them. They continue onward with the crowd.

"Do you think it's dangerous outside the town? What if there are snail knights? Or rabbit warriors? Or gangs of dogs with clubs?"

Daphne shakes her head.

"I suppose we'll find out. We haven't any choice, have we?"

Daphne starts to make a sound, but at that moment a little girl comes towards them to say hello, a little too enthusiastically. Daphne hisses, flaps her wings, and the child retreats, reaching for her mother's hand.

"Sorry!" Marjorie calls after them.

As much as she wants to get a good spot to see the harvest, Marjorie can't help stopping at the window of the bakery. The smell of bread and sweet things wafts through the open door. In the window,

amongst the cinnamon whirls and lemon cakes and berry tarts, there are marzipan fruits shaped like those of the marginalia trees, which in turn are shaped like penises and vulvas, or both, or sometimes neither.

The sweets are painted, lifelike, in all sorts of colours, shapes and sizes. Marjorie looks at each in turn, fascinated by the sheer variety.

"Stay there," she says to Daphne, as she pops inside the shop.

When Marjorie comes out, Daphne is nowhere to be seen.

Marjorie looks left and right, but there are only people. No—not quite. A ram goes past. He has a handsome brown face, and ears that stick out through the spiral of his horns. Though his eyes are fierce, he nods respectfully as he goes by.

"Have you seen a swan?" Marjorie asks.

No answer.

Maybe he's a little deaf, she thinks. The crowd seems oppressive now, too loud. Would Daphne go back home? Or would she go on to the orchard?

"Daphne!"

Some passersby look at Marjorie with concern, but no one stops to help. No one wants to miss the harvest.

The orchard. She'll have gone to the orchard.

Marjorie dashes down the street, bag bumping on her shoulder. Soon the crowd grows thick. She says

"sorry, sorry" as she eases through the gaps, still calling for Daphne, scanning the ground.

What if she gets crushed?

What if...?

Then, just as the press of bodies seems unbearable, she's through the gate and rushing up a grassy slope. The tops of trees are visible, leafy and green, plump fruits hanging from their branches. Marjorie moves along the top of the slope, and there is Rose, and in her arms, a swan.

"Daphne!"

"Did you lose her?" Rose asks. "She's here. Don't worry."

Rose passes Marjorie the swan. Daphne rests her neck on Marjorie's shoulder and makes a sound that Marjorie takes for an apology.

"You mustn't go running off," Marjorie scolds, closing her eyes a moment. Then Rose's arms are around them both. Marjorie feels as if her breath has left her body. When she pulls back, there are tears in Rose's eyes.

"You look nice," Rose says, but Marjorie thinks she's wrong, that she's the one that's beautiful. Rose wears a dress embroidered with golden fleurs-de-lys, an apricot blouse beneath, and sage green hose. Her short dark hair is pushed back behind her ears. Her eyes are sparkling.

"Thank you," Marjorie says. She sets Daphne on the grass, puts down her bag, takes off her hat. "Oh! I got you a present."

She hands Rose a paper bag. Rose looks inside and grins. "Thank you," she says. She puts the sweets

away, then moves next to Marjorie and takes her hand.

They look down over the orchard. The trees are in a kind of natural amphitheatre, and beneath them are baskets lined with linen cloth. People with poles stand ready to shake the branches and dislodge the fruits.

Marjorie leans her head on Rose's shoulder.

"I wish I could come with you," Rose says, "But you know I have to—"

"I know," Marjorie says. "Hush. I'll be back before you know it."

It's not much longer before the bagpipes begin. It's the ram Marjorie passed earlier, and she wonders briefly how he came to learn to play. A cheer goes up. The folk beneath the trees begin to beat the branches with their sticks. Ripe fruits fall into the baskets.

Marjorie is glad of Rose's hand, although her own is clammy. She squeezes, and Rose squeezes back.

They watch the harvest, until all the fruits have fallen. Marjorie wonders if she'll return from her journey to find the leaves have fallen too. There might be snow, or purple crocuses amongst the orchard grass.

One thing she knows for sure is that Rose will be there, waiting.

And soon enough, she will be home again.

MORGAN WELCH

Morgan Welch is a British writer of speculative fiction. They've been a finalist in both the Writers of the Future Contest and Baen Fantasy Adventure Award. They love historical martial arts, painting miniatures, and roaming the craggy hills of Shropshire.
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Q&A with Morgan Welch

The following questions were posed by Nancy J. Hayden, author of *Skogul*, and are answered by Morgan Welch about their story *Marginalia*. Portions of this interview have been edited.

I love the word marginalia and its meaning, notes written in the margin. Is the title an invitation to the reader to make notes and interact with the text? That's a neat idea. I interpreted the story itself as marginalia, notes about the central story of Marjorie and Rose that we are not privy too. We're only getting the marginalia. And yet, it could work the other way too. That the marginalia are the things we don't know about these two, notes we're don't have. Will you elaborate a bit more on the title and its meaning in the context of your story?

> I really like titles that work on multiple levels. The story was originally inspired by imagery found in the margins of medieval illuminated

manuscripts–that's where the references to snail knights, rabbit warriors and dogs come from. But the main inspiration was an image of a nun harvesting penises from a tree–you can see it here.

It wasn't until later I realised the word "marginalia" could be the name of the trees themselves–it reminded me of "bougainvillea."

I'd never considered it as an invitation to the reader, although that's a lovely idea! I did feel that the name fitted with the story being a small glimpse of a larger narrative though–that part was intentional.

There are a lot of references to sex, fertility and celebration within this story, yet I felt an undercurrent of loss and sadness. Marjorie is leaving and even though she keeps saying she will return, there is a sense that "she doth protest too much." A lot can happen in her travels. There are dogs and rabbits and snails, an ill father... It seems quite possible she won't return. That permeates the whole story. What I'm wondering is did you set out to write the story in that way with this loss undercurrent, or did it evolve during the writing process? Maybe you could explain your writing process for this story in a general sense as well.

Loss is an interesting one. It's a theme that comes up quite frequently in my work, and it's difficult to pin down why that is. I think on some level we all have a fear of rejection–that may be part of it. But the books I grew up

reading also had it as a theme–the *Dragonlance* books by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman come to mind.

As well as being inspired by that medieval tree, the references to genitalia partly reflect the fact that many people don't know their bodies as well as they might. Religion is partly to blame for that. Many people have a lasting sense of shame–about their genitals, about masturbation, about their sexuality, and so on.

Is a tree with dicks on it really that shocking? Should it be? I find it fascinating that a monk would choose to draw it.

I also have a feeling a lot of people think their genitals are "weird" or not "what they're meant to look like." I wanted the piece to be a celebration of variety.

I also wanted the story to be as inclusive as possible. That's another reason for the variety of fruits. A good friend did some sensitivity reading for me, to make sure things were coming across the right way.

In terms of the writing process, I often start with an image or idea and go from there, without any particular plan. That sometimes works out on the first attempt, but more often, I end up going through several drafts until I end up with something I'm happy with.

This one definitely took a while to come together.

The symbolism of swans in folklore is vast and varied, from beauty, love, loyalty to transformation, otherworldliness and mystery. Upon my first reading I took the swan as a symbol of loyalty and love, but on further reflection (and as an ecologist I know they mate for life), the absence of Daphne's mate added to my overall feeling of loss within the story. What was your intent by adding the swan?

> Daphne started out as another medieval image–a heraldic device known as the Bohun Swan. But I also I wanted some whimsical cuteness in there. She's a beautiful creature, but also ungainly on land. That seemed to fit what I was going for.

Outside of Wonderful

By A. Katherine Black

A breeze drifts across the grasslands to dance with the lone willow. Peace stands within the drooping fronds that wave and slap at their face, while Miss quips directions from her seat at the base of the tree. Reaching for a frond, Peace prepares to cut it with the stone knife, but stops at Miss's new order to instead take another, clearly more suitable frond.

"No, not that one. This one. Can't you even see the difference?" Orders flow from Miss like they always had. "We absolutely must have the prettiest ones, or our game will be nothing but a grim and embarrassing disaster."

Peace dips their head to Miss, movements slowed by the gravity of her innocence. Pain sparks in their arm, brief and sharp. A dose from their internal chem pack releases Peace from the sudden weight threatening to crush them whole.

Peace obeys Miss until the sun's orange glow glitters through the tips of dangling willow fingers.

Gathering the mass of severed fronds into their arms, they follow two steps behind her as they cross the meadow. Balancing the bundle in one arm, Peace uses their other hand to free the back of Miss's smock every time it catches on a prickly patch. And so, they make their way across the meadow, over the hill, and down the path to the cottage. As they always had.

Tucked into her bed, belly warm with hot tea made from flowers picked yesterday, Miss's droopy eyes turn to Peace, standing in their place by the door. "It must be dreadful," she says, a slip of awe in her voice, "living on and on and on." She pulls the blanket all the way up to her nose and snuggles into the pillow. "No fun at all."

Peace's words stretch thin across the space between them. "Rest now, Miss." But her eyes are already closed, her face relaxed as a springtime cloud.

They wait until her breathing evens, and then they retire to the table outside her door and prepare the fronds for the next day's weaving.

The clay comb glides through Miss's hair, but then it angles where it shouldn't, pushes back against Peace's hand. Just behind her right ear. Had that been there yesterday? It's here now, unexpected as it is inevitable. Peace does a poor job of hiding their reaction.

Miss reaches back to work fingers under her long hair, to greet and explore this first sign of Nature's Course. "But I feel fine." She explores the lump,

round and stiff. "I feel nothing, outside of wonderful." As she always says. As she will always say.

Peace finishes combing and begins to braid. Miss is unusually quiet.

"No!" She stops Peace when they try to bundle the braid in a pile across the lumpy spot. "That won't do. I'll be seeing the others today." Her fingers flutter together in a delicate clap. "They'll be so jealous."

Words catch in Peace's throat, as instead they drape Miss's braid in lovely loops down her back.

Vey appears at the top of the hill and hoots to Miss, lounging in soft meadow grass. Dove trails a few steps behind. Peace continues under Miss's vague but firm direction, placing willow hoops, woven and dried, into the ground. Halfway down the slope, Vey calls ahead with corrections to the game set-up, orders flowing faster after Miss's agreeable shrug. Dove is sent trotting ahead, to pull hoops and place them elsewhere. The leftmost just a pace further back, the backmost three paces to the right, *no, no, to Vey's right*, and so on.

Peace helps Dove move the hoops while Miss and Vey hug and begin their usual chatter.

Dove speaks under breath, "Do you live?"

Peace relaxes at their old friend's familiar voice. "I am alive. And you?"

Dove's nod is barely perceptible. "I am, indeed, alive." And they go about rearranging the hoops, as their Vey and their Miss discuss and re-discuss, and then change their minds again about the set-up of this day's game.

Sir crests the hill, Hope a steady two steps behind. Miss and Vey squeal and clap at the arrival of their third. The game is declared to begin in a scant few heartbeats, and it is unanimously prophesized to be the best game ever. Hope helps Peace and Dove distribute wooden mallets, and they spread around the same brightly dyed twine balls the three of them had made when Miss, Vey, and Sir were much smaller people.

The game begins. The three socialites gabber on and on as they knock balls across the grass, through this hoop and around that hoop. Two of them jump and laugh each time the third's ball is knocked aside, that third displaying a well-practiced stomp and pout. The sun peaks in the sky, its warmth soothing Peace's old face as they watch from the treeline.

Miss is bent over her mallet, taking a practice swing next to the ball she's planning to hit, when she bolts upright and gasps. "I nearly forgot," she says, and tosses her mallet to the grass. "I have beaten you both," she waggles a finger back and forth between Vey and Sir, "in something way more important than this silly game."

Protests burst from the mouths of her peers, along with appropriately curious prompts.

"I ..." she lingers on every word as she spreads her arms and bows deeply, "have my very ... first ..." she points behind her right ear, "lump!"

Dramatic gasps and whistles mingle with birdsong drifting out from the woods. Vey and Sir drop their mallets and rush to feel Miss's lump, to proclaim at its amazing roundness, at its impressive firmness. After a long while soaking in the exclamations of her peers, Miss rights herself abruptly, causing a wave of vertigo. Her face slacks. Peace is at her side in seconds, as she stumbles this way and that. Cradling her arms above the elbows, Peace murmurs light reassurances. It begins, as it always will.

The game is solidly forgotten, in the shadow of such important news. Miss, Vey, and Sir tromp to the top of the hill and plop down at their chosen picnic spot. Dove and Hope join Peace behind the tree where the meal necessities were stored. Peace is still, crouched before a basket, tightly gripping the handle.

Dove presses softly at their shoulder. "Remember my mistake."

"Wanting someone to live should not be a mistake."

"The law permits wanting," Dove says. "It does not permit acting."

Hope sighs.

"And yet, I am alive," Peace says.

"Indeed, you are." Dove's smile is kind and is filled with generations of grief.

Festive chatter drifts to meet the buggy approaching from the woodland path, long before the market is in sight. Pre-market gossip picks up speed within the buggy as Miss, Vey, and Sir shift excitedly in their seats, jostling the harnesses slung across Peace, Dove, and Hope. Who will have the best flowers in their hair? Who's been winning all the meadow games? Who'll be showing off the biggest lumps and the reddest boils?

Nature's Course hadn't reached this section of the wood at the last market, but now it's here, and soon it'll be all that matters. The race to the most dreadful, most agonizing, most natural death will be the new subject of competition, as if it were just another meadow game. Pain sparks in Peace's medial tricep, as their internal pack drops an extra chem boost to get them through the day.

They emerge from the treeline to a view of bustling, excited activity ahead. The mass of tented stalls to the right will be displaying all the latest baubles, made from spun cotton and dried fronds, from river rocks and carved wood. The clearing swarms with Miss's peers, giggling and scuttering about, chatting in this group and that, hopping and squealing with every bit of news and gossip.

They veer to stop along the line of buggies to the left. Miss leaps out before Peace can remove their

harness. Before she hits the ground, Peace sees the dip in the grass that she does not, sees her foot plant itself in the hole, sees her ankle bend and twist. Peace isn't able to stop it.

Miss is crying on the ground when they reach her. Vey and Sir flurry about with gushes of sympathy, while Peace inspects the ankle. Twisted, but not broken. Consoled by her peers' exclamations of bravery and many a pat on the back, Miss lifts her arms to Peace, who scoops her up. Into the market they go, Miss beaming with a fresh sign of Nature's Course to flaunt amongst her peers.

Candlelight flickers across the boils on Miss's face, across the boils on her arm as she lifts it and spreads her fingers. Hoarse words dangle on her shallow breath. "Peace."

They're there in an instant, perched gently on the edge of the mattress. The room smells of dust and sweat, of infection roaming free. They dab a cool moss bundle across Miss's forehead, around her swollen eye.

"What's it like, Peace?"

The question comes like it always does. Peace holds a practiced quiet expression, while their insides scream. If only she'd ask another question.

They would reach into their own flesh, tear it apart with bare hands, pull out their med pack and jab it into Miss's arm in an instant, *in an instant.* If she asks, the law will allow Peace to provide any and

every chem she could ever need. The boils would disappear. Her breaths would come easy. She could run across ten meadows as if it were nothing. But she won't ask. The pride of living the natural life, of facing the natural death, it's all she knows. All her ancestors wanted when the laws were laid down.

"Peace." Miss grabs their hand mid-dab, holds it still with dwindling strength. "Tell me what it's like."

They brush damp hair from her swollen face. This face that had glowed with delight for so many seasons. This face that could live on. But Peace knows their own depths, better than they used to. Knows this burning desperation, this familiar frustration. Knows it masks something else. Something difficult to name, difficult to face. Deeper than jealousy. Thicker than regret.

"Well, Miss, it feels—" Should they say it feels fine? Good, even? That is the truth, and also it isn't. Far from it. "It feels like the world turns and turns, without me."

The corner of her mouth twitches. "Peace. So silly." Her words wheeze. "The world turns. What—" she coughs, "what does that even mean?"

The innocence is stifling. The chem pack prickles inside Peace's arm, reminding them to breathe.

"Rest now, Miss."

Miss had chosen a lovely clearing for her offering. Her body, stretched across the grass, has begun to bloat. Nature has begun its work. Peace leans against

a nearby tree and watches the wealth of creatures accept her offering. It begins with the tiny ones, all buzzing and crawling, but soon come the larger visitors. The black birds circle overhead, announcing her gift with piercing calls. The cougar will arrive before long, will sniff this offering in appreciation. Her cubs will mew tentatively, sweetly, before joining the feast. Miss would have clapped her hands in joy at Peace's description of these creatures, with their quiet feet and strong jaws.

Peace's arm aches where someone has refreshed their nutrient capsule, again. They stay with Miss, watching until green sprouts from between her clean ribs, tiny, elegant petals unfolding to meet with the sun. The flowers open and close, open and close, enduring nature's elements, escaping by mere chance the hungry eye of a passing deer.

A hand eventually falls on Peace's shoulder, beacons them to come away from the clearing where her bones now provide structure for an impressively busy little ant colony. Peace's neck aches as they turn to meet the eyes of an old friend.

Dove supports their arm as they stand, as they try to remind their legs how to move. Side by side the two walk, over the hill and into the cave, through the door and down the cool, concrete hallway. Down the long angles of stair, muscles aching with each step. Peace unrolls their voice, gently shaking it out. "Do you live, my friend?"

"I am alive." They reach the landing, reach the door. "And so are you, old friend."

Dove gestures to the button and waits. Peace's trembling hand extends and applies pressure, just enough, to set the mechanism in motion. Bars move behind the walls until the door is released. It opens.

Peace lingers just inside, cushioned by the sounds piped through speakers. Of birdsong, of a waterfall, of a breeze through dried leaves. The incubators fill the room in tidy, long rows. Most are still occupied. Peace sees the future in their small faces, each working and twisting under their own warm light. Noses would stretch, cheeks would lift, questions would pour forth until they thickened into opinion.

An ache, ancient and stubborn, calls from Peace's side, scars from long resolved boils insisting they be remembered. Peace remembers.

Dove's shoulder brushes Peace, and Peace searches their face. Eyes just as wrinkled as they were back then, back when Peace knew of nothing but market days and meadow games. Their jaw just as firm as it was when Peace lay covered in boils, as it was when Peace didn't ask the question. They didn't ask, yet here they were, alive.

In breaking the law, in giving Peace life without request, Dove had committed themself to an eternity in this role, but Peace had done their required time, completed their required role long ago. If they'd only ask, they could leave this place, ride out to the city to join others like them. Yet here they are.

Hope emerges from the back of the nursery, cradling a baby swathed in bright cotton, as it reaches a stiff fist to brush at their chin. They pause to offer a nod to Dove and Peace. Their expression, furrowed

and soft, is already distant, swirling with the impending life of the delicate thing in their arms.

"Friend," Peace asks, "are you alive?"

"I am indeed," they say. Their words drip with future tears and future pain, with future giggles and future games.

Any anger Peace might have felt toward Dove had diffused long ago, dissolved in a vast ocean of understanding. Peace steps toward the incubators, stretching their arms in preparation for the weight they're about to carry, for the weight they'll always carry.

A. KATHERINE BLACK

A. Katherine Black lives in Northern Minnesota with her family, their cats, and her overworked coffee machines. She loves making snow angels and dreaming up stories about creatures with bunches of legs, tentacles, and wings. Find her at flywithpigs.com or on bluesky @akatherineblack.bsky.social.

Q&A with A. Katherine Black

The following questions were posed by Gwendolyn Maia Hicks, author of *The Heart That Beats Behind the Bones*, and are answered by A. Katherine Black about their story *Outside of Wonderful.*

First, I just want to say that this story moved me very deeply. The way that you hint at what's revealed in the ending, the way that this information recontextualizes Peace so beautifully that I immediately had to go right back to the beginning and read everything again, is masterful. How did you approach writing your ending and building the story towards it?

> I'm so glad you were moved by this story! As it happens, I wrote the end of this story first, and then I went back to write the beginning. I don't always start at the end of a story, though–I often don't know where a story is headed until I finish the first draft. I think I started with the

ending of this one simply because the last two scenes were so vivid in my mind, ready to jump onto the page. It turned out that writing the ending first helped me gain a stronger sense of the protagonist's emotional arc, which made it easier to string the rest of the story together, scene by scene.

I don't know if this anecdote is particularly exciting, but I read "Outside of Wonderful" for the first time while I was getting a tattoo on my ribs (excruciating) and it brought me both immense comfort—it was so easy to get lost in—and immense respect for my mortal body, the pain that it could endure! Miss and her friends rejoice in the decay of her body, for example, while Peace's connection to their own feels tenuous, with their chem pack masking any pain that they might feel. I found this contrast quite poignant. How did you approach the characters' relationships with their bodies in this story, especially as it relates to the broader themes of mortality?

Oh, wow, I can imagine such strong sensory input could definitely add to the impact of a story like this! This story first came to me while I was at the 4th Street Fantasy Convention in Minnesota a couple of years ago, listening to a panel discussion on the topic of immortality in speculative fiction. At some point, someone brought up an observation that immortality is often considered a good thing in stories and movies, and they noted that immortal characters are often very wealthy. That was

when this story sprouted in my brain–a story about an immortal servant whose life was far from easy. As the story built, a clear distinction emerged between physical pain and emotional pain, and I found myself exploring the power of social influence - how a society could lighten one person's pain while deepening the pain of another.

The use of the term "Nature's Course" to describe this eventual illness and death really hit for me. I felt the perceived inevitability of it, the sort of noble surrender to a force greater than yourself—the "generations of grief." Nature as a whole seems tightly interwoven with all things in Miss and Peace's world, especially in the quietly climactic scene when Nature's Course takes Miss back in its own way. What inspired this turn of phrase, and were there any specific things in nature that inspired you while you were writing or conceiving of the story?

I love thinking up new terms as I'm building a fictional world. When I settled on the phrase "Nature's Course" for this story, I was thinking about linguistic relativity–how a society's views influence the language its people use, and in turn, how the language these people use influences how they think. In terms of this story, I imagine the very specific ideals Miss's ancestors held dear when they began using the term Nature's Course to describe their untreated illnesses. Nature's Course sounds softer than "cancer" or "malaria," for example

- especially when the phrase is spoken with a kind of reverence. As Miss and her peers are raised with a positive view of illness, which they call Nature's Course, they see no reason to fear when it finally appears. I think the term also carries an implication of inevitability meant to guide Miss and her peers to see Nature's Course as the only option open to them, subtly dissuading them from considering the possibility of resistance. Indeed, Nature's Course is so valued and anticipated, the only thing Miss is afraid of is being the last one of her peers to experience it.

I'm a writer who lives by my first lines, so I always like to ask people about theirs! The first line of this story set a tranquil tone for me, like an endless afternoon. How did it come to you?

Honestly, I don't remember exactly how those words came to me. Out of curiosity, though, I peeked at the first draft of this story, where I found a slightly longer and messier version of the same line. This highlights the importance of redrafting as part of my writing process! While a first draft may hold the bones and the heart of the story I want to tell, it's in the subsequent draft (often multiple drafts) where I add clarity and details that hopefully make my story much easier for a reader to digest. :)

Finally ... I am so compelled by the relationship between Dove and Peace. Do you have any lore about

them you can share that maybe didn't make it onto the page?

> Oh, I wish I did! This story holds almost everything I've imagined so far, but my brain doesn't need much encouragement to explore beyond this story about Miss and Peace. Thanks to this question, the gears are now turning! I may take a break from my current WIPs and dive into a prequel, or maybe a sequel, to "Outside of Wonderful!"

Skogul

By Nancy J. Hayden

Skogul looked into the shiny copper plate that Mingus had hanging on the wall. She turned her head to the left and to the right but kept an eye always focused on the reflection. She tapped the metal with her thick black beak. It was a silly thing to do, but so was looking at her reflection.

"Skogul," Mingus said. "Why do you always tap the plate?"

Skogul didn't reply. Mingus wouldn't understand because she didn't really understand either. Even though she knew it was her reflection that stared back, and not some raven stranger, she couldn't help but peck at it, just in case this time, she was wrong.

"Come here, you vain old lady."

Mingus put out his thin arm for the bird. Having nothing better to do, Skogul complied, but she didn't land on his arm. She never did. Instead, she perched on his shoulder. If he indicated his shoulder, she flew

to his arm. It was a silly game, but Mingus was a silly old man.

Skogul investigated the old man's hat, a felted brown hat with a wide brim. Perhaps he put a treat there.

"Nothing today," Mingus said. "I have something important to tell you."

Skogul turned to face him. Mingus's dark eyes sparkled in the dim light of the cabin.

"Kraa, Kraa."

He scratched her head. He was well trained.

"My daughter is visiting today. You remember Erna, the old witch. Well, not quite as old as me."

Skogul remembered Erna. How could she forget? Erna and her broom. Forever sweeping, sweeping, sweeping. Raising dust as thick as snow in the old man's cabin, and then Mingus and Skogul coughing and hacking for days afterward. Well, this time, Skogul would find a high perch and stay there until the dust, quite literally, settled. She puffed up her wings, but the old man put his hand on her shoulders before she could fly off.

"Now wait." He scratched the nape of her neck. "I want to talk to you first."

Skogul lifted her head and rolled her eyes. Mingus lecturing! There wasn't anything more comical than that. She would toc toc and cluck cluck like one of his stupid chickens in the henhouse, and he would ramble on about how Erna was someday going to provide a home for them both. Not if Skogul had a say in the matter, which of course, she did.

"Today is the day," Mingus said. "The day we're going to pack up and move in with Erna. Just for the winter. In the spring, we'll re-evaluate."

Skogul opened her beak and clacked it shut. The old man chuckled.

"Hello, Father." Erna's voice cackled in the doorway. "How are you doing today?"

"Fine, fine. I was just telling Skogul the good news."

Erna's face froze into a forced smile. "Skogul. It's strange how I keep forgetting about your bird."

Skogul used the lapse in the old man's attention to fly out the open door and up to her favorite perch, a high branch in a nearby hemlock. A cool breeze blew. Skogul fluffed up her feathers and swayed with the tree.

"Skogul," the old man called. "Skogul."

She didn't want to answer, but she felt bad for the fellow. He worried so. "Kraa. Kraa."

He waved up to her and went back inside.

It was true Mingus was getting old. He couldn't do even the simplest spell these days. The last few times he had to light the fire by carefully blowing on a small ember he'd found still burning in the grate. A month ago, he would have sprinkled some powder over the wood, snapped his fingers, and they'd have a blazing fire in the hearth. He was also getting forgetful. They'd taken a walk in the forest foraging for fungi and herbs last week, and Mingus had forgotten the way home. He'd never done that before. It was Skogul who had to fly above the trees looking for the wisps of smoke from their cabin. Poor

Mingus. He didn't want to move any more than Skogul did, but he was trying to be cheerful and positive about it. The old fool.

The sun peeked above the far away mountains and shone on the forest and meadows of Skogul's home. She called out and heard the answering calls of her raven friends. They didn't understand why she'd stayed with the old man all these years, but she couldn't remember a time before Mingus. Her earliest memory was pecking his cheek. He'd fallen from the tall tree when he was robbing the nest. He probably would have died from exposure if she hadn't pecked and woken him. After that she'd felt obligated to look after him. Skogul was as surprised as everyone else when she started to feel affection for him. Maybe it was because she was just a baby when she met him. She couldn't even fly yet, but whatever the reason, she did like him.

She couldn't leave him, but neither could she live with Erna. True, Erna's cottage wasn't far from the old man's hovel so she could still fly around her usual places. And there was plenty of room and plenty of food. But it wouldn't be the same. And at her age, Skogul couldn't change her ways. Neither did she want to start taking care of Erna and her family.

The more she thought about it, the more convinced Skogul was that Mingus needed to stay put. If she didn't go with him to Erna's, Mingus would wither in a matter of weeks, or worse, sneak away and get lost in the forest again with no one the wiser. If she did go, she'd be the one who withered. Maybe if she talked to Erna, they could work it out.

On the rare occasions that she'd tried to have a conversation with Erna in the past, the witch had just ignored her. Well, the past was the past. Skogul would have to try again.

Erna was focused on washing the breakfast dishes when Skogul flew onto the ledge of the open window and looked in. She paced back and forth a few times, gathering her thoughts, and then cleared her throat to get Erna's attention.

"Aye," Erna shrieked. "You scared the wits out of me, bird. Scat."

Erna waved the dish towel at Skogul who hopped further away on the ledge.

"Kraa. Calm down, Erna. I want to talk to you about Mingus."

Erna stopped flicking the towel and stared at Skogul.

"That's better," Skogul said. "You know, I really don't think it's a good idea for Mingus to relocate at his age. I've heard far too many stories about old folks moving later in life, only to succumb to melancholy and illness."

"Shush, bird," Erna said going back to her dishes. "I've got better things to do that listen to your babble."

Typical Erna. Too busy to listen to the truth.

"As you know," Skogul continued. "I've taken excellent care of Mingus over the years, and I will continue to do so for the remainder of his life. By the way, I think he has many years left to him, if he stays active and happy in his own cabin."

Much to Skogul's annoyance, Erna started humming.

"Your children, as well behaved as they are," Skogul said knowing they were rough and wild kids who last time they visited, hid Mingus's hat and walking staff out behind the henhouse, "will undoubtedly be too much for Mingus."

Erna ramped up the volume of her humming as Skogul talked louder and louder.

"Kraa. Listen to me. I will take care of Mingus. You will continue to visit as you always do. You're always welcome here, but Mingus is staying put. With me!"

"What's going on in here," Mingus said. "I can hear you two way out in the privy. You're making more noise than the chickens."

The privy happened to be behind the chicken coop. Except in the dark, the hens made loud squawking noises whenever anyone had to use the pot.

"It's not me," Erna said wiping her hands on a towel. "It's that bird of yours."

Mingus laughed. Erna put her hands on her hips. Skogul flapped her wings in annoyance. This is what she got for trying to have a civil conversation with a witch. Mingus put out his arm, and she was so distracted she landed on it.

"Ha," he cried out. "Ha, ha! Did you see that Erna? Skogul flew to my arm. She never flies to my arm when I have it out. She always flies to my shoulder or the top of my head."

Mingus started laughing and skipping around the room. Skogul bounced around for a few turns and then flew to the window. Dizzy and a little queasy, she watched the old man continue to dance and laugh. Maybe he was worse than she thought.

"Father! Stop prancing around like a crazy man. What's gotten into you?"

Winded but still laughing, Mingus sat down on a stool. "For over eighteen years, I've been trying to get Skogul to land on my arm when I put it out. And today, she did it. She did it!"

"So what? She's a dumb bird and finally did something right. No sense getting so silly about it."

"Kruk!" Skogul shrieked. I'll show you a dumb bird. Skogul landed on Erna's head and started scratching Erna's hair with her feet, just like chickens do in the dirt. She didn't draw blood, but no doubt it hurt. Erna slapped and flapped her arms. Skogul managed to fly away before getting hit. She went to her perch near the rafters and watched the drama unfold below.

"Skogul!" Mingus called up, but there was a hint of laughter in his voice. "What's gotten into you today?"

Erna put her shawl up over her head and turned, red faced, toward her father. "Gotten into the bird?" she shouted. "That bird attacked me. That's what's gotten into it. Now, I'll tell you what's gotten into me. That bird is not coming to my house. You're going to have to leave it here."

The old man looked, wide-eyed at Erna. Skogul croaked loudly.

"I won't have that bird living with me, Father. It's loud and obnoxious. And dangerous!"

"But Erna." Mingus grew serious now. "She's my friend. My best friend."

"And I'm your daughter," Erna shrieked. "I won't have that bird upsetting the whole household and terrorizing the children and the neighbors."

"Terrorizing the children? More like they will terrorize Skogul. Good thing she can fly."

"Father!"

"Well, you know it's true, Erna."

Erna sat down on a chair next to her father. Breathing deeply, she took his hands in hers and rubbed them gently. He squeezed hers back. She opened her mouth to speak, but he put his finger to her lips.

"No, don't talk, my dear." Mingus's face had a serious sad look. Skogul watched intently. "I think I will stay here."

Erna drew her breath. "But ..."

He nodded his head. "You know that's the best thing to do. As much as I love you and the grandkids, I think I'll be happier living out the rest of my days with Skogul."

Skogul's chest puffed up a bit. She had won. Mingus wasn't going to leave. They could stay in the old cabin together.

"Father, please. It's too hard on you here. I want to take care of you. Let's just try it for a few months. Like we agreed to."

Mingus smiled and shook his head, but Skogul felt the old man's sadness, could see it in his hunched

shoulders, in the tilt of his head. He wasn't just being cheerful before. He really did want to move in with Erna.

"Kraa," Skogul said quietly from above. "I understand now."

Mingus and Erna looked up toward the rafters. No one said anything, except the hens clucking outside. Skogul saw tears falling down Erna's homely face. But more surprisingly, she saw a glistening in the old man's.

"Kraa. I'll come. I'll come. If that will stop the tears."

"Father." Erna looked intently at the old man. "Let's just try it for a few months. Skogul can come too, and I'll try to be good to her."

The old man beamed and looked up at Skogul. "Did you hear that?"

"Kraa." She heard. And she'd try to be good too. For, Mingus. "But just for a few months."

Mingus laughed.

NANCY J. HAYDEN

Nancy Hayden is a writer, artist, and organic farmer. She has an MFA in creative writing. A keen student of World War I history, she published *The Great Dark: Noir and Horror Stories of World War One* in 2018. She co-authored (with her husband) *Farming on the Wild Side: The Evolution of a Regenerative Organic Farm and Nursery* (Chelsea Green Publishing 2019). Her website iswww.nancyjhayden.com.

Q&A with Nancy J. Hayden

The following questions were posed by Morgan Welch, author of *Marginalia*, and are answered by Nancy J. Hayden about their story *Skogul*.

Ravens are cool. Did you have a particular reason for wanting to write about one?

> I wanted to write a story about an awesome pet. My husband had always wanted a pet raven. Ravens are super smart too, so as I'm thinking about the story I'm wondering, who is the actual pet? Is it Skogul or Mingus? That led to telling it from Skogul's point of view which was a fun place to be.

The names in the story have a Scandinavian flavour. What was your reason for choosing them?

> Yes, when I think about ravens, I think about Norse Mythology and Odin's two ravens who bring him information from around the world. I

was looking around for a Norse name and found out that one of the Valkyries was named Skogul. The Valkyries were the ones who chose the fate of dying warriors. It seemed like a perfect name and even informed some of my thinking about the character. Plus, I like its harshness as a name. It sounds like a good name for a raven.

There's a lovely bittersweetness to the story, and I think a lot of people will resonate with the difficulties around a loved one getting older. Did you write this from personal experience?

For sure. And how we misunderstand our aging loved ones. And how we misunderstand our relationships. There's a telling line in the beginning of the story when Skogul is looking at her reflection in the copper plate. She doesn't really understand why she does this because she knows it's her reflection, but still she taps the plate because "just in case this time, she was wrong." That sets up the story. And the whole story is about not understanding ourselves and others. Skogul thinks Erna just doesn't want to listen to her, but it's far more likely that Erna doesn't understand her squawks. Which then makes us wonder, does Mingus understand her? And Erna doesn't understand her father's relationship with Skogul. And Skogul doesn't understand it either. So there's all this misunderstanding between the characters and their feelings. When Mingus says in the end,

> "She's my friend, my best friend." He finally understands his feelings and can articulate them to Erna. And then Erna gets how important Skogul is to him. And finally, finally, Skogul realizes that she was wrong about Mingus not wanting to go live with Erna. When she says "I understand now." We get the feeling that it's a bigger understanding than just that Mingus wants to go. That she too has a deeper understanding of their relationship now.

How quickly did you write it? Did it flow out of you in one go, or was it slowly shaped and crafted over time?

> Once I get a couple characters in mind and the names, I do a lot of imagining around them in my head, their conversations and interactions. When I start writing, I feel like I know them well and a story can develop quickly. Once I have the story down, I step back and see what emerged. Who is really the pet was what I had in mind, but once I saw what came out, the story seemed to be more about misunderstandings. Then I went back into the story to play with that theme a bit more.

Past Lives and Loaves

By H. A. Titus

"I am craving one specific bread that was discontinued centuries ago. I hate being immortal."

I paused in kneading my sourdough cinnamon rolls and looked up. Across the bar—across the tavern's big main room—Carlyle sat in front of the fire, holding his wine glass up to the lantern and squinting through the dark amber liquid with a suspicious look in his eyes.

"Pardon?" I said.

He took a sip, his face relaxing from suspicion to pleasure. "Ahh, that's quite nice." He set the glass down on the little square, flat-topped chest that doubled as a coffee table and lounged back, arms spread along the carved wooden top of the sofa. He nodded to the dough resting beneath my palms. "The smell. It brought me back ... there was a bread in Antryon that smelled a little like that. Buttery and cinnamony."

"Savory? Sweet?" I asked, curious. A bread in Antryon? As far as I knew, the port city had only ever been famous for its fish stew, at least in the food world. But Carlyle was a vampire. A thousand-year-old vampire, if he was to be believed ... which he wasn't, sometimes, but no one really wanted to dispute him on his age.

Carlyle contemplated his wine for a moment. I waited, content to be patient for the moment. Vampires were solitary creatures, not used to carrying on a conversation or even speaking often with others. That Carlyle came in to the Rum and Honey tavern once a week was strange in and of itself, though once there he usually spoke the bare minimum required to order a glass of elven Roseyling, sit by the fire, and stare contemplatively as he sipped until the glass was empty.

Apparently, that was all he had this time as well. He drained the last of his wine, set the glass on the table, and stood up. He gave me a slow, solemn farewell nod, then swept out the door, his dark velvet cloak sweeping leaves into the entryway.

I sighed. Well, he couldn't really help it, could he? When vampires weren't skulking, they were sweeping their cloaks. And the dough needed to rest anyway.

I fetched the twig broom from where it rested in the kitchen, and propped the door open with what had once been my adventuring shield, which I'd had the blacksmith, Rudy, turn into a doorstop. The compass rose was still visible on the side, golden paint chipping and shedding flakes of glitter onto the stone porch.

As I swept the entryway, shooing the leaves back out into the cobbled street where they belonged, I thought about what Carlyle had said. Cinnamon bread from Antryon, popular hundreds of years ago? It was an intriguing puzzle, and I felt my old curiosity rising up from where it had been hibernating in the back of my mind.

I waved to Rudy, who was taking a smoke break outside the forge, his pipe turned firmly between his lips, and went back inside. "Ava," I said, going into the kitchen and replacing the warm in its usual corner.

The ceramic automaton looked up, her china-doll face as unmoving as ever, but with a friendly tone to her voice. "Good evening, Mara."

"What are you making?" I asked, glancing over her shoulder. When the tavern was bustling, Ava usually helped in the kitchen—the villagers had gotten used to a goblin serving them, but the china automaton was understandably a bit too creepy for most of them. Usually, she sat back here in the corner she'd appropriated for herself, putting bits of gears and wires together in strange, sculptural shapes.

Ava gave the usual answer. "Oh, just trying to remember."

The words, with the recent memory of Carlyle's melancholy as he'd spoken of the bread he missed from so long ago, wormed their way into my heart, making me feel a shadow of the sadness I imagined both Ava and Carlyle felt. I had no idea how old either of them were, but I could almost feel the weight of those years in a way that, I suspected, they

did not. I shook my shoulders. "Carlyle was telling me about a bread in Antryon that he remembers from when he was younger."

"Antryon? That's a city famous for fish stew, though."

"That's what I thought. But he says it existed—centuries ago, though."

Ava tapped her ceramic fingers against her ceramic chin, a soft clicking noise filling the room. Her arcane eye-flames flickered as she stared at the wall.

I waited for a moment, but nothing else seemed to be forthcoming. "Do you know of anyone in the village who might know more?" I asked.

Ava glanced at me, her eyes flickering in what I thought was amusement. "Looking to ingratiate yourself to the vampire?"

"He ... sparked my curiosity," I admitted.

Ava made a slight humming noise that reminded me of two tiny gears moving quickly. "It's been a while since something has interested you enough to pull you out of the kitchen."

I felt my face go warm. She wasn't wrong, but had it really been that obvious? Since my mysterious benefactor had fully turned the tavern over to me a few months ago, I'd scarcely left it. I'd been too busy trying to get the garden going and establish the menu, and all the other general minutia that went along of getting the ailing tavern back on its feet. Or, so I told myself.

I pushed any thoughts to the contrary to the back of my mind. This wasn't something I needed to think about right now. I returned my attention to Ava.

"The Draco may be able to help," she suggested.

I blinked at her. Had she really just suggested I go visit the resident dragon? I waved my hands down the sides of my body. "Me? A goblin? Go visit a dragon?"

Ava smiled, and her eye-flames flickered. "She is one of the only neighbors you haven't greeted yet."

"Isn't the new person in the village the one who is supposed to get homewarming gifts?" I demanded. "Not be the one handing them out?"

"She likes sweet things and unusual flavors, from what I've heard," Ava said, turning back to her gears.

I sighed and flounced from the room. She was right. Of course, she was right. I ducked into the storeroom and began searching for my jar of dandelion syrup.

A day later, I climbed the mountain that gave the village its name. The homes and farms nestled in a valley at the mountain's foot, winding along a river that glittered silver in the sunlight. Thankfully there was a cart track up the mountainside—the Draco had monthly deliveries of goat, her favorite meat, according to the local butcher.

Not that I'd spent yesterday afternoon visiting around the village, trying to find out the Draco's favorite foods—and if she really was older than Carlyle.

I turned from admiring the view and looked at my destination. I stood at the wide space of a sharp hairpin turn, and the ruts of the cart track stopped about a hundred feet away from where I stood, where a wide, sandy cave mouth yawned into the side of the mountain.

I'd seen some sketchy cave mouths in my time, and this looked like one of the nicer ones. Thick, sturdy timbers—that looked like the polished trunks of trees—propped up the opening, and two large iron hooks held unlit lanterns on either side of the cave. All in all, it looked more like the welcoming, if overlarge, entrance to a home rather than a threatening cave. I adjusted the wicker basket hanging at my side and trudged forward, my bare toes shuffling through the warm, sandy soil.

I was only a few steps away from the entrance to the cave when I heard a growling sound echoing off the rocky sides of the entrance. I froze, my heart leaping up to clog my throat. Despite what everyone in town had told me—"*The Draco is so friendly! Not like those northern ice dragons at all!*" and "*Just introduce yourself! She'll do you no harm*"—there was one thing everyone but me had forgotten to account for.

I was a goblin, and goblins were no friends to dragons. Ever.

I'd told myself it was no matter—I'd spent plenty of time dealing with dragons in my day, and had held my own against them, even the terrible ice dragons of the north. I could deal with dragons.

I just had to convince my watery legs and quivering insides, that was all.

I took another step toward the cave mouth.

Another growl echoed out, and this time, I could hear the words. "I can smell you, little rat. Run along. We don't want any goblin trouble here."

I flinched at the words "little rat." *It's all right, it's all right, she don't know any different...* "Draco?" I stammered.

The only answer I got was a snarl. By this time, I was even with the mouth of the cave—*right in the directory of the fire*, my mind screamed at me—and my hands shook as I unhooked the basket from my side. I folded back the embroidered tea towel and waved my hand across the still-warm baked goods, wafting the smell toward the cave. Then I looked up—right into a pair of smoldering orange eyes.

My legs buckled. I dropped the basket on the ground and scrambled backward, cringing. This was such a terrible idea. What had I even been thinking? The last time I'd faced a dragon, at least I'd been backed by my team, and we had more of a reason than mere curiosity. *That's it—I'm going back to my tavern and never leaving it again.*

"What is this?"

I looked up, still poised to flee if I needed to. The Draco had left her cave, and to my surprise, she wasn't nearly as big as the ice-dragon I'd last faced. She was still the size of a good-sized house, but the spines curving over her backbone were delicate, and the pearl luster of her scales caught the sunlight in a similar way to the river I'd just been admiring minutes before. Her delicate snout nosed at the basket, and then her tongue flicked over the top of

the cake I'd packed inside—only slightly dusty and crumbled from its fall. Her eyes widened, and she licked the top of the cake again.

"It's syrup cake," I said hesitantly. "I made it with dandelion syrup that I'd steeped Eastern chilies in." The bright red chilies had given the syrup a spicy kick that lingered at the back of the throat, more subtle than the spice they had on their own. I got up on my knees and dusted off my hands, eyeing the Draco hopefully.

She glanced over the valley toward the village. "Giving away all my secrets." Her tone was mild, almost even affectionate. She sat back on her haunches—she wasn't quite as tall as the pine trees hemming us in—and picked up the basket with one delicate claw, taking a bite from the cake. She closed her eyes as she chewed.

I held my breath. This felt oddly like the village's harvest festival pie contest last fall, although more was at stake than a blue ribbon.

The Draco's eyes opened, and she let out a contented sigh. "Well, that is nice." She turned her eyes on me again. "A goblin baker. Unusual. What is your name, little rat?"

"Mara." I got to my feet and dusted off the knee imprints in my skirt. Then I bobbed a curtsy. "The spicy syrup was Miss Dot's idea."

The dragon made a purring noise deep in her throat. "I should have guessed. She and Rudy always are the ones who know what their neighbors like." She scooped another bite out of the cake, swallowed, and laid the basket at my feet. It contained only

crumbs. She tapped the basket handle with one surprisingly delicate claw, then looked up at me, her eyes narrowed. "Well, Mara. I'm interested. Is there a bargain you would like to make for more of this spicy dandelion cake?"

My heart brightened a little. "You liked it?"

The Draco straightened up, her forked tongue running over her lips and swiping off the last crumbs of the cake. "It was passable. I don't get much cake. Most people assume that offerings of meat are the best thing for a dragon." Her eyes narrowed, and what looked like a sly smile tugged the corner of her lips upward. She leaned down and lowered her voice, as though imparting a whisper, though her voice still boomed around me like a thunderstorm. "Though if you must know, I prefer cakes and breads over any of that." She straightened up, then settled into a crouch, wrapping her tail around her paws and looking like nothing more than a huge, scaly cat making a loaf. "So. You wanted a bargain?"

I blew out a determined breath. I knew how to do this. I'd had to do this every time that Beak, the enormous orange tomcat who haunted the tavern, jumped on the table. "I have a friend, Carlyle, he's—" The words had started out as a rush, but then the Draco held up her paw and I stammered to a halt.

"The vampire, yes. I know of him, though he's never come to pay me tribute."

"Well. Neither had I, until now. And being a vampire, he's probably even more afraid of things that breathe fire," I pointed out.

The Draco's lips tugged into that half-smile again. "This is true. Please continue, little one."

"He was telling me the other day about a bread that he used to really enjoy when he was younger. It was made in Antryon. And he said it was really buttery and cinnamony. In fact, he said it smelled a little like the cinnamon rolls I was making, although not quite." I twisted my hands in my apron. "So, being as you're older and wiser than he is, I was wondering if you'd ever known about such a type of bread. I'd like to make it for him."

The Draco raised a bony eyebrow. "You would like to make a long-forgotten bread for the vampire?"

"Well, he was one of the first who befriended me when I first arrived in the village. I think we both feel a little like outcasts, even though most have been welcoming to us. So ..." I shrugged. "I'd like to do something for my friend."

The Draco lowered her head to my level. "You understand that most vampires cannot taste anything but blood any longer?"

"He can, a little bit. He comes into the tavern of a night and orders wine. He says it's because he's abstained so long, a bit of flavor has come back to him."

The Draco shrugged. "Well, who am I to gainsay a lived experience." She settled more comfortably into her loaf position. "The bread that you want was called Cardamom Bread. You've heard of the spice cardamom, yes?"

I nodded.

"I never knew the exact recipe, but I tasted it a few times, when travelers had it on them." She closed her eyes, thinking for a moment, and I found myself wondering if the travelers had freely offered the bread to her, or if it had been something she'd eaten after raiding merchants. The Draco opened her eyes and gave me a knowing look, as if she knew exactly what I'd been thinking. "I believe it had cinnamon in it as well. There was something else ... something with a flavor similar to nutmeg, but not as sweet. It was bitter, with a peppery finish ..."

I thought for a moment. "Could it have been mace?"

"Perhaps? It was sweetened and glazed with maple syrup. It was in a sort of long loaf, about so—" She indicated a length of about twelve inches with her paws. "And rolled, so that each slice had a spiral of the filling. I remember it was a very rich bread."

I scrambled for the little notebook I kept in my apron pocket and quickly scribbled down her description. "You have a very discerning palate, Draco. Thank you."

The Draco smiled this time, a full, genuine smile that only showed a hint of her back teeth. "Well, who am I to discourage and ignore the best goblin baker in the county, possibly the country itself?"

This time, I did blush.

After I made my way back down the mountain track, I stopped in at the mercantile and bought what

I needed. The mace wasn't in stock, and even though I knew I had some in the pantry from when I'd initially stocked the kitchen, I went ahead and ordered more for when Hamsar made his monthly trek over the mountains to the trading posts. If this was the correct type of bread, I imagined I'd be making quite a lot of it. Besides, I'd been experimenting with potato curry anyway, and Ava insisted that I was missing mace when I'd queried her about the subject. How an automaton knew, when they couldn't taste or smell, I had no idea, but she had been right before.

Then, I got to work.

The next night, when Carlyle showed up to have his nightly glass of wine, I met him at the door, opening it so that a burst of fresh, right-from-the-oven, hot bread smell burst over him. Carlyle froze on the threshold, only his nose twitching, as he stared over my head at the glossy, perfectly-browned loaf of bread sitting on the counter.

"Is that ..."

"Would you like a slice of bread with your wine tonight, Carlyle?" I asked, grinning.

The vampire glanced down at me, and a smile tugged the corners of his lips. "How did you ever pull this off, Mara?"

"Trade secrets," I answered, arching an eyebrow. "You should understand that, being a vampire and all."

Carlyle burst out into an unexpected laugh and stepped into the inn. He stopped in the entryway and hung up his cloak—that was surprising, he usually

kept himself wrapped up in it even when he sat next to a roaring fireplace—then pulled up a barstool and sat by the counter, staring down at the bread and licking his lips.

"Well, do you want to eat it or drain it?" I joked, ducking back behind the counter and placing a bread knife and a jar of whipped maple syrup on the counter next to him. "I can't quite tell."

Carlyle picked up the knife and cut into the bread, a wisp of steam wafting into the air. He took a bite of the slice, closing his eyes as he chewed.

I held my breath. His reaction to the smell itself had been a good sign, but did it ...

He opened his eyes and grinned at me. "This tastes just like the bread I had in Antryon, but better."

I let out the breath I'd been holding and propped my elbows on the bar countertop. "Thank goodness! I was beginning to get worried."

"I'm afraid I'm going to shock you again, Mara. Well—" Carlyle glanced over his shoulder at the hanging cloak. "Perhaps more than I already have tonight. I'd like a cider, please, and I'll have it here at the bar."

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" I asked teasingly, arching my eyebrows. "You're acting distinctly un-vampire-like."

"I first had this bread before I was turned," he said softly, slicing another piece for himself. "When I'd travel into Antryon as a part of a merchant train, my favorite part of the journey was when I could finally sit down outside a cafe and order a chilled

cider and a loaf of this bread. So, yes, I imagine I might be acting very un-vampire-like for a little bit tonight." The long, faraway look in his eyes faded, and he grinned at me again. "But don't worry. I'm sure by tomorrow night, I'll slink in here in my cloak and order another glass of wine and sit by the fireplace to brood while I sip it."

"Should I have another loaf of bread ready then?"

"Yes," he murmured. "Yes, I do think that would be lovely."

"I'll get you that cider," I said, and pulled a tankard from the shelves underneath the bar. As I went to the barrel of cider and began to pour, I couldn't help but do a small, happy jig. I had recreated my friend's favorite treat, and despite the still-leaky roof and my unknown patron, my heart felt so warm and full that it felt like I might burst.

H. A. TITUS

H. A. Titus can usually be found with her nose in a book or spinning storyworlds in her head.

She loves mythology, Dungeons & Dragons, and a good cup of tea. She lives in the Midwest with her weather-mage husband and two super-villain sons (don't mind the robotic dinosaurs, they're friendly) who enjoy dragging her into real-life adventures.

Some claim she is half-fae, but that's just unfounded rumor.

She is the author of the Celtic urban fantasy series The Crucible. Her serialized novels, short stories, and other writing can be found at hatitus.substack.com.

Q&A with H. A. Titus

The following questions were posed by Margaret Treanor Frey, author of *Tome for Tea*, and are answered by H. A. Titus about their story *Past Lives and Loaves*.

Is this bread real? Have you made it yourself? Where do I get it?

> I'd kind of imagined this bread to be a fancy variant of cinnamon swirl bread—which I do make! This is my favorite recipe.

Is the high level of diversity just normal for this world, or is there a regional back-story explanation? Something about the inn?

> It's mostly normal, though the inn does have a little bit to do with it! I'll let you guys see a little bit of spoilers for the worldbuilding—a lot of the people in the village are retired adventurers, or the families of adventurers. I

admit to being really inspired by Travis Baldtree's *Legends and Lattes*, where the main character, Viv, retires from adventuring to open a coffee shop. So many folks talk about wanting to be adventurers in a fantasy world, but sometimes I think that even great adventurers would like to eventually settle down and have a quiet life.

The side characters are so full of tantalizing tidbits, like Ava and her ceramic bits and crafting hobby. Do they already have story arcs written in other places?

They don't—yet! But I eventually do want to build out the cast of the village more and write more stories involving them.

Green Water, Blue Water

By Erin Keating

The ankles were the damnedest part. As green water pooled into thighs, knees, calves, Vele could never quite balance her whole body atop those minuscule ankles. How did humans do this? It was a miracle that more of them hadn't toppled into her canals and drowned. Not that she wanted that. There was quite enough human refuse in her canals already, thank you.

Vele pulled herself up the algae-slick stone steps of a narrow street, like she did every month. The new moon cast a velvety darkness over her city. Between the lit lamps, shadows hid that her skin was a shade too green, her cropped hair too spongy like the algae growing canalside. When the water levels in the canal dropped each month, the humans assumed it was because of the new moon, not because the spirit of the canal had crawled from the water in a valiant attempt at a human body.

Vele checked her reflection in an empty shop window—her form was passable, not wobbling at the edges—before turning the corner. The shadow-drenched alley opened up into the revelry of the main road. Along the banks of the widest canal, the humans dined: empty shells clattered on their plates and sweet red wine sloshed in their glasses. Candlelight and lamps battled against the nighttime.

How mortifying it was to be among them, to be a creature imprisoned in a body rather than the infinite possibility of flowing water. It was no matter, Vele thought, as she limped on wobbling ankles toward the seawall. She would bear this body gladly if it let her see Tosca.

Vele could picture her best friend already seated on their favorite bench atop the seawall. Tosca always managed to arrive first, her blue-black hair smooth, her sea-foam skin unwavering. Vele was always late, ready to collapse into a puddle at any second. For once, Vele would like to meet Tosca on time.

Amid the crowded street, waiters in crisp white uniforms wove through passersby to deliver steaming trays of food to diners seated canalside. Vele flowed through openings in the crowd, careful not to bump into someone lest they discover cold water where warm skin should be. Music rang through the night, a tambourine pulsing through the street like a heartbeat.

"I'm late, I'm late," Vele murmured in time with the song.

As she neared the seawall, she could make out each distinct lantern hung along the parapets and shadowed figures promenading atop the wall. One of them, she knew, was Tosca.

Vele picked up her pace—only a few more blocks.

A chair overturned in front of her. Glass shattered. An old woman sprawled on the cobblestones. A handbag flew through the air, landing with a splash in the canal.

Vele blinked. The old woman on the ground blinked too, her eyes wide with shock. Vele couldn't touch her, could she? Her own body would collapse with the effort of lifting the woman off the ground. Vele extended a cautious hand.

The moment was broken in an instant. The white-coated waiters appeared, righting the chair, easing the woman into it, clearing the glass from the street. Vele stood by, stunned by her own uselessness. She was the canal—the heart of this city—and she couldn't even help one of her own in this damned, mortifying human form.

A strange feeling rose up in Vele, one she had long thought herself incapable of feeling—a sharp, cold determination steeling itself in her chest. She glanced toward the seawall.

She was already late. Tosca would understand if she was a few minutes later.

Tosca arrived at the parapet first, as she always did. Best friends though they were, she would never

confess to Vele that she always headed to shore a little early, before the darkest hours of the night, because she liked to arrive first and compose herself. No one, not even the spirit of the sea, could climb all those stairs to the top of the wall and not be disheveled by the end. The balls of her sea-foam feet ached.

Vele always complained about taking a human form—how heavy and cumbersome it was. Tosca empathized; lagoon water had always seemed so slick and brackish. But Tosca was sea water, buoyant with salt and foam and wind.

There had not always been a wall buttressing the city against the sea. In Tosca and Vele's girlhood, some millennia ago, the green water of the lagoon and the blue water of the sea met in an inlet thick with reeds and mud. Tosca and Vele had passed their childhoods chasing each other through that inlet, whispering stories under the starlight. They'd had no need for human shapes then, no walls separating them, no steps to climb each new moon.

When Tosca looked at Vele these days, she saw her friend in double—the water she was and the water she had been layered on top of each other like a reflection in a still pool. Tosca would never forget the first time she had seen Vele's human form. It was their first new moon meeting. Vele's new body wobbled and wavered, bubbles rising beneath her nearly translucent skin, shifting as she walked so that her feet had grown bulbous, and her head had grown narrow and fish-like. Tosca had prodded Vele's cheek, and Vele had yelped and leapt away.

"Please," Vele had huffed. "I'm barely holding this monstrosity together as it is. You don't want me to become a puddle, do you?"

Tosca had laughed then as she laughed now, alone on their favorite bench overlooking the sea. Tosca couldn't tell the time without the moon, but the sky had taken on a rich darkness. Shades of indigo, violet, and crimson streaked almost imperceptibly through the heavens. Surely, Vele had never been this late before.

Tosca rose and paced to the other side of the wall overlooking the city. Each new moon, before Vele arrived, she marveled at Vele's city—the green canals shimmering in silvery lamplight. Tosca had always wondered what it would be like to walk among it, but Vele never invited her in.

"It's nothing special. There are too many people. It's not like the sea," Vele would say.

Vele had not always hated humans. Once, she had been delighted and intrigued by them, how they moved so freely between her waters and Tosca's, how their ships carried bright jewels, glittering bronze instruments, and flowery perfumes. When they built their city atop her lagoon, Vele had yielded without complaint, flowing through the new canals lined with brightly painted buildings to reach the sea.

But she had changed when they built the seawall—all gray stone and iron gates—and dammed up the canals except to allow ships passage from the city. Vele was not a being meant to be contained. In all the centuries since, Tosca had watched her friend's resentment simmer.

Vele hadn't gotten herself into trouble, had she? Surely, not—not in her own city. And yet, Tosca's watery body rippled with dread.

Vele—who let her face drift into a shape not quite human if people looked at her and Tosca too long, who swore at the seawall in words that would shock a sailor, who held a grudge as though she were a being of pure salt—Vele could certainly manage to get herself into more trouble than she knew what to do with.

Tosca took one last glance over her shoulder at her beloved sea. And then she descended the stairs, for the first time, into the city.

Vele squatted on the edge of the canal. To squat seemed utterly primitive, the most grossly human gesture. Yet here she was. Far below her, a small handbag bobbed in the low canal water.

Everyone on the street was distracted by the woman who had fallen. With one quick movement, Vele stretched her hand over the canal. The water rose without her needing to think, a gesture as reflexive as a human uncurling their fingers or bending their knee.

The handbag rose with it, right into Vele's waiting grasp.

The weight of it made her palms wobble, surface tension almost breaking, but Vele willed herself to stay together. She inspected the bag: the pretty green

fabric had been embroidered with pale daisies; the top fastened with a delicate brass kiss lock.

A vivid memory washed over her, from the earliest days of the city. Vele, as a young canal, had lingered by a brass worker's shop. The air shimmered with the stench of metal, and the brass worker moved sweat-slicked through his workshop. In the store window, candlesticks, pots, and buckles gleamed in the late-afternoon light. How long had it been since she had let herself linger near the surface, watching the lives of her people, rather than skulking at the bottom of the canals?

That brass worker was long gone—humans lived such strangely short lives—but perhaps his shop was still there, run by some distant descendent. Vele found herself curious to know. She had not been curious about anything in a long time.

Vele picked her way through the crowd that had gathered around the old woman, who was waving away everyone fussing over her. The red wine stain on her shirt had been cleaned into a pale pink blotch. A bruise on her wrist had begun to blossom.

Vele held the handbag out to her, panic bubbling in her chest. She had never quite perfected human speech, always sounding like she was talking underwater. She and Tosca understood each other perfectly, slipping into their own watery tongue when they spoke to each other. What if this woman heard her and knew that she was different? Vele thought she might evaporate on the spot.

The woman's eyes lit up at the sight of her bag. "Oh, thank you, thank you! How did you get this

back? Did you jump into the canal for me? I can't believe it!"

She grabbed Vele's hand. Vele's body ran cold. She waited for the woman to react, to realize that Vele was not human. But she didn't. She continued to beam up at Vele who managed a nervous smile in return.

Abruptly, the man seated across the table stood up. Vele hadn't even noticed him. He was younger than the woman, broad and mustachioed, but they had the same high brow and sloping nose.

"Come with me," he said.

Vele looked at the man and then back at the woman, who gave an approving nod. Vele sighed. At least she'd have an interesting story for Tosca.

She followed him across the street to a darkened bakery, the glass display empty and the shutters closed. "One moment." He gestured for her to wait outside. It seemed, for as many words as his mother had spoken, he spoke as few as possible.

Vele waited on the stoop as, inside, lights flickered and cabinets rattled. She closed her eyes and listened to the song of her city: the gentle chime of forks against plates, the steady chatter of conversation, the rhythmic tap of boot heels on cobblestone. All that music was underscored by the gentle shush of the canal lapping against stone.

Oh. Perhaps being a human was not so mortifying after all.

For so long, Vele had carried in her chest a hot anger that threatened to boil her alive. But now, the waters in her chest were cool and still. Vele opened

her eyes, marveling at the silver light of the city. What would Tosca say if she saw her now? She would scold her for being late, certainly.

The shop door chimed behind her, and the man emerged with a paper bag in his hand. "Thank you for helping my mother. These are not so fresh, but are still good."

Vele opened the bag, releasing the spiced scent of licorice. Inside were a dozen thin cookies with patterns like lace. These cookies were useless to Vele; they'd simply grow soggy in her mouth. But when she looked back up at the man, a small smile peeked out from beneath his mustache.

In her strongest, clearest voice, she said, "Thank you."

Vele was right, Tosca thought, as she inched her way through the crowded streets. The city was not like the sea. The sea's currents were steady and predictable. The current of people along the main road felt utterly random, ebbing and flowing with humans' whims. And yet, it delighted Tosca to surrender to it.

On every side of her, there was something new to behold: menacing gargoyles peering down from rooftops, sprays of deep purple flowers cascading from windows, a wilted rose stuck in someone's letter box.

Deep shame bubbled up in Tosca's chest. Once she had tried to destroy this place.

It had been centuries ago, when they first dammed up the canals, separating Tosca and Vele. Though the day had been windless, though there had not been a cloud in the sky, the sea reared back and threw herself against the walls, the stairs, the dams. In the waves, Tosca had cried, "Vele, Vele, Vele," until the canal waters rose with Vele's weeping.

They had managed to find each other through a crack in the wall, the mortar between two stones flaking away so that Tosca could pour into the city. She had circled around Vele in a churning current as they had when they were young and did not know all the ways water could be contained.

"Come with me," Tosca had demanded, pulling Vele along. It did Tosca good to remember that once she had been the impetuous one, and Vele the voice of reason.

Tosca knew what she was asking—the enormity of it. Vele could not leave. She was canal water, she was not sea water. To go with Tosca would be to become Tosca. They were the closest, dearest of friends, but they were not the same being. And yet, that was what Tosca had wanted: to be so much of each other that they could not be separated ever again.

That day, Vele had pulled back, seeping into the depths of the canal. Vele had said, "I will meet you in a few days, the night of the new moon, atop the seawall. We will be all right, Tosca."

Vele was right, of course, as she always was. Friendship could not—should not—make each other into something they were not. And yet, over the centuries, Tosca had seen her friend grow weary,

jaded. On their nights on the parapet, Vele sometimes looked at the sea like she wanted to jump into it, taking all the canal water with her, leaving the city dry.

It frightened Tosca that Vele should want to be anything other than herself.

Their meeting atop the seawall had happened every month for centuries. Vele always ran late, certainly, but she had never missed one. Tosca whirled around, unmoored. It seemed whole worlds were waiting down every narrow street. How would she ever begin to find Vele?

But then Tosca saw something that made her stop and watch.

Vele had never been this late. She hurried to the seawall as fast as her legs would carry her, yet with each step the wall seemed farther away. How many times had she walked this exact path beneath the new moon? Had this road always been so impossibly long?

Vele clutched the bag of cookies in her moist hands, the paper growing damp. She would offer them to Tosca as an apology. "You'll never believe what happened to me," she would say, and Tosca would laugh and forgive her. High above her, it seemed the sky was already beginning to brighten.

These humans would not distract her anymore. A dozen old ladies could fall out of their chairs and drop their bags in the canals, and Vele would not stop, not even glance their way. Tosca was waiting

for her, and she would not keep Tosca waiting any longer, not even—not even to watch a group of children sitting beside the canal.

Vele slowed. There were four children wearing the giddy expression of being out past their bedtimes. They passed a net back and forth between them, dipping it into the canal and fishing out broken glass and soggy paper.

Vele stared. They were cleaning the canal. Her canal.

The children turned. When they spied Vele watching them, they hurried to gather up their net and the garbage.

"Wait," Vele cried. The sound was so sudden, so instinctual, she had not quite managed to make it seem human. Instead, it splashed like water against stone. But the children waited.

Vele held out the bag of cookies. "For you," she said, the words hard in her mouth. "Thank you for cleaning the water."

A girl, the tallest among them and clearly the ringleader, stepped forward. She gave the bag one decisive sniff. Her eyes widened with delight. The other children crowded around her, each vying for a cookie. Vele laughed, and was about to hurry on, when the girl shouted, "Wait."

From a pocket of her overalls, she pulled out a fragment of blue glass, jagged at the edges. "Thanks for the cookies."

She let the glass fall into Vele's open palm where it shone the color of the sky. The children hurried on,

disappearing down the next alleyway. Vele held the glass up to the light.

"I shouldn't have worried," said a voice like the sea.

And there she was.

Vele drank in Tosca. Her blue-black hair shone inky in the lamplight. Tosca opened her arms wide, and Vele tumbled into her. They held each other like they hadn't seen each other in centuries.

Vele loved Tosca as much now as a dammed canal as she had when she was a sprawling lagoon. When she was with Tosca, she was every version of herself that she had ever been—young and old, weak and strong, desperate and content. Tosca had known them all and loved them all.

Then Vele began to realize the strangeness of it. Tosca was here, in her city, standing by the canal where children had just been dredging trash. Embarrassed heat began to bubble in Vele's cheeks.

But Tosca grinned, "Aren't you going to give me the tour?"

"Are you sure? It's—it's so small compared to the sea, and honestly, I don't I remember where everything is. It's changed so much, while I—"

Tosca took her hand. "Then we'll discover it together."

They roamed the city—Tosca on her sea-foam legs and Vele on her wobbling ankles. At the end of labyrinthine alleyways, light and music guided them to hidden courtyards and restaurants where people were draped in gold and jewels. In darkened shop windows, masks in all shapes and sizes grinned down

at them, while the artist worked by candlelight. Friends and lovers leaned on each other as they stumbled home, laughing and singing so loudly neighbors threw open their shutters to scold them.

As they walked, they talked—for hours and hours, of everything and nothing, of old memories and new tales, so that time seemed to double back on itself, so that the night stretched long, so that Tosca and Vele were young again.

When first light appeared, a haze of fog and pipe smoke blanketed the city. Vele and Tosca settled on the edge of the canal, watery legs swinging absent-mindedly against the stone.

"What?" Vele groaned when the weight of Tosca's gaze had become unbearable.

"What do you mean, what? I can't smile at my oldest and dearest friend?" Tosca teased. Vele narrowed her eyes. Tosca shrugged. "You seem happy is all—I can't remember the last time I saw you happy."

"I'm so sorry I was late. I didn't forget or get distracted. I don't know what happened, really." Heat boiled in Vele's ears, but Tosca was still smiling.

"Because, for the first time in centuries, you let yourself enjoy your city."

"But—but I abandoned you! You had to come looking for me."

"And I did. And I found you. And I had more fun with you tonight than I've had in a very long time. Maybe this becomes our new tradition."

Vele's chin wobbled as she looked at Tosca—Tosca, with her heart as vast as the sea. Vele had to

laugh to keep herself from crying. "You'll need to climb twice as many stairs!"

Tosca wrapped her arms around Vele, squeezing her until she thought she'd pop. "I'd climb all the stairs in the world for you, you fool."

Dawn broke then, casting the sky aflame. In its rosy light, anyone awake at that hour, strolling the streets or paddling the canals, would have seen Vele and Tosca for who they really were: the green canal that pulsed through the city and the blue sea that stretched beyond the wall. They sat with their heads tilted together, catching sunlight through a piece of glass that shone like the sky.

ERIN KEATING

Erin Keating earned her B.A. in creative writing and literature at Roanoke College and currently works as a grant writer at an arts education nonprofit. Her fiction has appeared in *Kaleidotrope*, *Wyngraf*, and *Metaphorosis*, among others. When she's not writing fiction, she writes lyrics for The Lofte: thelofte.bandcamp.com. Find her online at erinkeatingwrites.com.

Q&A with Erin Keating

The following questions were posed by A. Emery Watkins, author of *Bitter Tea*, and are answered by Erin Keating about their story *Green Water, Blue Water.*

Lagoon water meets sea water: do the names Vele and Tosca refer to that somehow?

> They don't exactly, but I wish I was that clever! I arrived at the characters' names through some inspiration from a trip to Italy with my best friend (more on that in the next question) and some free associations. Vele came from the street name Calle de le Vele–or the street of the sails–which is the street in Venice our hotel was on. Tosca came from Puccini's opera of the same name. My friend and I saw a production of Verdi's *La Traviata* at the Verona Arena on our trip, and I started there in my search for a name as a nod to that experience. But many of the women's names in *La Traviata* were too floral for

my water motif for this story, so I made a leap to *Tosca*. It was the first opera I'd ever seen–watched on the Metropolitan Opera's free streamed performances during the pandemic lockdown–and it mesmerized me. When I needed a name as all-encompassing as the sea, Tosca seemed like the right fit.

With the canals, and the reference to masks in shop windows, I get this impression this takes place in Venice (or a Venice-like city). If so, do you have some history with that city that made you want to set it there?

Yes! My best friend and I–who have been friends since we were seven–took a trip to Italy together last fall. We had talked about taking a trip together for years, and finally the timing worked out. I'd wanted to go to Venice ever since I'd read The *Thief Lord* by Cornelia Funke as a child and lost myself in the misty alleyways and mysterious islands she conjured in her tale. Venice was everything I'd imagined it would be. I don't think I've ever been to a place where the landscape so clearly shaped the culture and people's daily lives. There was a phrase I read, "Beyond water," to refer to life outside the canals that really got in my head. I knew before I even left the city that I wanted to write a story where the setting felt like its own character, and that to do that, I'd write a setting inspired by Venice.

The story had me ruminating about the give-and-take relationship people have with the natural world, despite that many seem not to recognize that relationship these days. The narrative gives a welcome nuanced take, so I was wondering if there was a deeper thought like that which might have inspired it.

> Thank you! While the story evolved into that connection between people and nature, it started as a story about long-term friendships. In the case of Tosca and Vele it's a couple of millennia, but for me and my friend it's a couple of decades. (Hi, Kim! **waves**) I wrote this story to celebrate the joyful and sometimes bittersweet discoveries of knowing someone for that long–watching someone come into their own, but also realizing that they've changed and matured from the person you'd known as a child, and that you have changed right alongside them. I think all relationships have some element of give-and-take to them, and the relationships where we love unconditionally are the ones where we don't keep tally of the gives and the takes because we trust that they'll even out as we go through life together. I'll give when she needs me to, and she'll give when I need her to, and neither of us will ask for more than the other can give. I think that we can consider the natural world in that way too: caring for it like an old friend.

Colophon

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